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STOUT 69



The Bidderfrost Dragon

By Buddy Saunders

Illustrated by William Stout

Beware the Jabberwock, my friends – and Bidderfrost, and lovely enchantresses, and especially errant tank crews with a whisky-guzzling tank.

Aerma of the Bidderfrost was not pleased with the dragon she had conjured. She sighed despondently, absently splashed away a rivulet of sweat that flowed between the twin moons of her breasts. Her delicate hands found the first page of the antique, percaline-bound variorum, *A Glossary of Dragons, Ophidians, and Lesser Vermiforms*; nimble fin-

gers fluttered the leaves, revealing a staccato of dragomorphs to her vision. Here were represented all the known dragon types, from worlds near, yet, incalculably remote: The juggernaut, bereft of cunning, more massive than the whole of Bidderfrost Castle; the repentant sard, clever as a spellbound fiend, swift and decisive in its killing; the lancet vene-

THE BIDDERFROST DRAGON

nare that destroyed enemies with an inventory of poisons; the xenovolant, aerboreal, able to cremate armies with the exhalation of a few fiery breaths.

Aerma's dragon was none of these nor could she find it represented anywhere within the pages of the glossary. She slapped the book down on the sill of the mirador, pouted her full, usually laughing mouth, and eyed the dragon, the product of a full day's conjuring amid sweltering heat and acrid-smelling vapors.

It is a toad! she thought with morose conviction. *Certainly Ghotter has conjured far better. When combat is joined, his beast will ingest mine in short order. Then Ghotter will flay my army, come triumphant to Bidderfrost. Inevitably, the haughty little squab will have down my walls and will have me down as well. His ambitions will be realized; mine will be ended.*

Aerma thrust self-pity aside as if it were an ill-fitting garment, and continued her inspection of the dragon. It lay in the castle courtyard, unmoved from where it had first manifest itself, apparently unaware of its many shortcomings. Aerma had hoped for a creature with mighty wings capable of carrying it high over Ghotter's army where it could rain down stones big as hay wagons. But the creature slumped in the courtyard seemed too small to ascend with such weights and, even

had it been larger, its total lack of pinions would have kept it hugged to the earth.

As to the dragon's actual powers, Aerma was dubious. It appeared a creature cleverly adapted to defense rather than offense. It was compact, cased in a dull green armor. The head lay toward the center of the flat, rectangular body, wrapped in the same, chitinous, plate. Its mouth, if indeed it were that, was long and rigid like the siphon on certain sucking insects. Of legs, it had none that were readily apparent. Aerma had hideous visions of it cowering among the hedgerows or blandly siphoning sap from the trees in the peach orchards while Ghotter's dragon smashed the walls of Bidderfrost like a child crumbling a cookie.

Aerma stamped one naked foot and berated her father for giving up the vale of life at so inappropriate a time. He had been an accomplished wizard; Aerma was not. Her cooking had already accumulated a fatal reputation; now her ability as a sorceress seemed destined to the same fate.

So preoccupied was Aerma with her dragon, that she was not aware of Mindrell's presence at her side until he spoke. He was a tall lean man with sparse features and pale, questing eyes. His slender artisan's fingers caressed Aerma's bare arm.

"An offense to the eye," Mindrell said, shaking an ermine-trim-

med sleeve toward the dragon. "It does not move. I fear it is dead. Or perhaps only asleep?"

Aerma jerked her arm beyond Mindrell's caress. "Hold your tongue, painter! Who are you to belittle my handiwork? Be content to warm my bed and spare me your observations."

Muttering to himself, Mindrell stalked away to his seldom-used bedchamber.

Aerma's mind again centered on the dragon. Mindrell's words had been meant as no more than a simple-minded jest, but now, as Aerma stared at the dragon, it did seem to have the aspect of a thing asleep. And—Aerma resisted a constricting in her throat—it could truly be dead through some mystic error on her part.

As if in reassurance, the creature began to make a sound like iron bees in a copper hive. It coughed, bellowed, belched smoke and fire. Bidderfrost's mighty gates departed from their hinges, spread themselves before the outer castle wall like brass-bound kindling. The deafening report drove Aerma's palms to her ears. Involuntarily, her eyes snapped shut. When she opened them, the dragon was trundling itself toward the gaping portal.

Aerma shrieked in dismay, shouted commands the dragon seemed disinclined to obey. As the creature disappeared beneath the gate's architrave, Aerma darted back into her

wizardry chamber where she snatched up a codex bound in black leather and embossed with twisting paleographs. Even with the weight of the book clutched under her arm, her feet seemed hardly to touch the stairs. She reached the courtyard, shrieked until peasants appeared from various recesses.

A young groom, with a mouth that would leer even in repose, crept furtively from the stables, expecting at any moment to be set upon by the dragon. At sight of the castle mistress, exceedingly beautiful and exceedingly naked, the leer of his mouth excelled itself, and fears of dragons were forgotten.

Aerma fixed the groom with a frosty stare. "Gawk another moment and it will be your last! Fetch my horse and spare the saddle! I cannot tarry!"

The groom loped off, returned quickly with a horse. He was still gawking, although guardedly. Aerma vaulted to the animal's back and drummed her heels into its lightly-sheening flanks. As she galloped out the gate, both peasants and courtiers rushed to the parapets, their motives varied.

Two miles from Bidderfrost, on a low verdant crest, Aerma overtook her fugitive dragon. It lay in the shade of several massive oaks, again concealing its vitality. As she reined to a halt amid deep banks of clover, the creature swivelled its blister-

like head and pointed its powerful siphon mouth toward her. Aerma's large almond eyes grew larger as she recalled the shattered gate. Desperately, she sought through the pages of the book, seeking the spells concerned with dragon mollification.

But the movement of the dragon caused her horse to panic and throw her. She landed amid the clover with a jarring thump that did her no harm, but her book of spells fared worse. It alighted upon its spine, somersaulted twice, then fell for the last time amid a fluttering of loosened pages. Aerma watched in horror as ancient bits of magic were carried away by the breeze. With an inarticulate whimper, Aerma clutched at the valued book. As if with vindictive purpose, it fell open and another page rose up in the air. Aerma watched the page go, not daring to imagine what wonder had thus been lost.

Too many miniscule Waterloos had overtaken Aerma of late. She began to cry, not like the woman she had forced herself to become, but like the girl she had been but weeks before. Long, wracking sobs welled up. Gradually, they helped to purge her of the many pent-up fears her conscious mind had refused to acknowledge. Finally, she rubbed her eyes and looked up at the dragon.

An astonishing thing occurred. A large oval plate of scale folded back on the creature's head, another upon

its chest. Then, a human head protruded from one of the holes exposed by the removed scales. Aerma was amazed; a dragon disgorging men?

"Look at that broad, Captain! Would you look at that naked broad!"

"Shut up, Hounslow. Can't you see she's been crying?"

The second voice belonged to another man who had thrust his head out of the dragon's cranial cavity. Aerma could not understand the words of either.

Although incomprehensible, the second man's voice had a mild tone. He gave a pleasant nod. "Look, ma'am, you're not the only one with troubles."

Aerma's expression remained vacant.

"You understand me? Parley-vous Francais? Verstehen Deutsch? Capire Italiano? Espanol? Ellenas? Bu robopume no-pyckku? Speekie English?"

"Try piglatin, Captain."

"Hounslow!"

"Alright, alright!"

While the dragonmen made further efforts to communicate, Aerma explored that portion of her book devoted to languages. She soon found the spell she sought. Like a supple peri, she rose to her feet, held the book open with one hand, and lifted the other in a monitory gesture.

"Sequa perg!" she began, the

words incomprehensible to the dragonmen, almost so to her. A long series of strident oxytones followed, then a string of abrupt morphemes like sounds pecked out of a typewriter. "Dequa lingua incognita!"

The naked girl looked up from her book. "How is it that my dragon is infested with pests?" she demanded, planting one small fist upon the swell of her hip.

"We are men and this is not your dragon," Captain Morton Bugg answered from the cupola of the Sheridan.

"Indeed?"

"Indeed."

Bugg climbed out of the cupola, dropped to the earth beside the tank. It had suddenly occurred to him that he and the girl had been speaking in a language other than English. When he tried to identify the new language, his mind drew a blank. The tongue had no counterpart within the frame of his experience. Its guttural quality was suggestive of archaic German, but only faintly so. And by no stretch of the imagination could this place be the Germany of any time, present or past.

Bugg ran a hand through thinning, pepper-grey hair. "Recent events have been singularly irregular, wholly disquieting."

A second man extricated himself from the vehicle. "The Captain means to say he—and maybe the

world—is going nuts."

"Essentially, that's it," agreed Bugg, surveying the topography for the hundredth time. One moment their Sheridan had been in the arid deserts of Arizona, a part of an Army reserve field exercise. Then, an instant later, it was in a castle courtyard such as earth had never known. Now, they were just off a dust-track of a road, lush undulating fields spreading all about them.

"My need brought you here," said Aerma.

Bugg frowned. "Your need commands bizarre talents."

Aerma made a gesture calculated to suggest helplessness. "It did not spare me a fall from a frightened horse. Now I am stranded."

Bugg gazed at the multi-colored landscape for the hundred and first time. "Better to be stranded than misplaced."

Aerma shook her head in disapproval. "You were not misplaced. It was an act of calculation!"

"Anything you say," agreed Bugg. He pointed toward Bidderfrost Castle, a distant rivet on the horizon. "My *dragon* will carry you back to your castle. In return, I hope you'll be so kind as to answer a few questions."

"Ask on, then," smiled Aerma, striding forward in a way that fixed Bugg's mind on anything but his questions.

The Sheridan dusted toward Bidderfrost Castle. Within the space of

a quarter-mile, Bugg accepted the fact that Aerma was a wizardress, and that her magic had plucked both tank and crew away from the earth and to this place—another dimension, another world. Half way to the castle, Aerma had finished describing her plight, melting all but Hounslow to sympathy. Three-quarters of the way to their destination, Aerma had weeded a promise of assistance from Bugg and his crew. Hounslow, however, became enthusiastic only after Aerma's mention of her considerable wealth and her desire to share it with all who rallied to her cause. Strategy was the subject of discussion as the tank raked to a stop in the Bidderfrost courtyard, scattering chickens and persons, all as one.

Bugg climbed out, then assisted Aerma up through the cupola hatch. Over her nakedness, she wore a light fatigue jacket, a protection against the tank's air-conditioning. Rycott, Bugg's gunner, followed, sharing his wonder with Zaktovik, youngest of the four-man crew. Hounslow, less impressed, studied the granite and marble of Bidderfrost with a critical eye. Now the castle seemed devoid of life.

"They hide!" laughed Aerma in a girlish falsetto. "The sight of my dragonmen frightens them!"

Inside a great and ancient hall, Aerma tapped a chime-gong. Reluctant servants appeared. "Prepare food and drink," commanded Aer-

ma. "And summon Mindrell to dine with us."

Aerma turned apologetically toward Bugg. "I am sorry that only my artisan and myself are available to dine with you. As you know, my nobles and warriors are otherwise occupied."

"With you for a host," Bugg smiled urbanely, "we'll need no other company."

Presently the table was set. Mindrell appeared, elegantly dressed in a silk gown, sullen of mood. Aerma also reappeared, having excused herself only long enough to go to her chamber and dress. Mindrell seated himself upon Aerma's left, eyed Bugg on the right with eyes that suggested hostility.

Aerma laughed gaily. "You must all forgive Mindrell. Like all artists, he has difficulty containing the passions that go into his work. Even now he is concerned with a most vexing subject."

"Indeed, a most difficult piece," muttered Mindrell, his pale blue eyes gazing abstractedly into a half-emptied goblet.

Aerma squeezed Mindrell's bejewelled hand. "Be of good temper, painter. Your talent brings pleasure to many. Why should not another's talent do the same, and to the profit of all, at that?"

Mindrell made no answer, giving his full attention to the wine. Soon he excused himself and departed the hall, having drank much and

eaten not at all.

The tank crew continued to dine sumptuously. Their wine—dark, pungent and heady—befuddled the mind quickly, distorting reason and destroying inhibition. With evening at hand, Hounslow staggered away after a servant girl whose pert, wiggling hips were a pleasant distraction from her homely face. Rycott, his ambitions more aristocratic, made a tipsy overture toward a pretty court maiden who had hovered demurely just outside the hall all during the meal. Zaktovik had succumbed to his wine, and was sprawled comfortably beneath the table boards, his glasses dangling precariously on the bridge of his nose.

Bugg found that he and Aerma were alone in the great hall, Zaktovik being unconscious and thus discounted.

"In all the worlds, you would be a wonder to behold," said Bugg, his voice husky. He tried to focus the twelve, wine-made images of the girl, now dressed in a white muslin gown of modest design.

Aerma smiled beguilingly, knowing the powers of the wine. "Which image do you prefer?"

"I see twelve perfections. I cannot choose."

"Ah, this Bugg is a poet."

Bugg suppressed a belch. "Indeed I am! I only play with my dragon on weekends and summers. The rest of the time I am a professor of linguistics at Arizona University."

"Ari . . . Arizoo . . ."

Bugg slipped closer to the girl, touched her lips with a finger. "Do not bother the word. You would not know the place."

"Are you happy there?"

Bugg shrugged. "Few men are truly happy."

Aerma sprang to her feet, pulling Bugg up after her. "Ho, Bugg, you lie! Only this morning I was sadder than ever I have been, but then I had cause. Now I have a dragon. Now I wash in a sea of joy!"

Bugg swayed on his feet.

"Come," said Aerma, "come before you fall."

Aerma's bed was large, almost palatial, and they were small, but they found each other without difficulty. Two moons—one orange, the other blue—splashed the bedchamber with light that melted in through high, lancet windows. Curtains like clouds trembled with the night breeze. Over the bed hovered the redolence of intimate contact.

Dawn was coming in blushes of mauve and gold when Bugg awoke to find Aerma already awake and propped upon an elbow, studying him with guileless eyes.

Bugg brushed the black cascade of hair from the oval of her face. "Yesterday I thought you a virgin."

Aerma laughed musically. "Last night I gave it the lie, did I not?"

Bugg nodded, remembering the night, a dream fogged by the wine. Aerma, like her world, was a thing

new to Bugg's experience. If earth held such women as Aerma, Bugg had missed them all.

Kitten-like, Aerma stretched, then sat up and clutched her knees. "My father was not a clever guardian of my virtue, and in this field of knowledge I found many willing tutors."

"I suspect you were soon doing the teaching," suggested Bugg.

A knock came at the oaken door. Aerma slipped into a yellow kirtle and unbolted the door.

"The one called Hounslow is concerned with the whereabouts of his captain," said a willowy servant girl.

"Tell him we will see him at breakfast shortly," replied Aerma.

Aerma began to dress, then comb her hair. Bugg dressed, then stepped out onto a balcony, glad to be alone with his thoughts. Two worlds appeared to lie before him. One, the bright wonder of Bidderfrost realm where dragons were real and where, apparently, a princess was falling in love with him. The other, earth unseen but authentic in memory, a place all the more terrible because its dragons were never clear, never obvious. Yet earth was home.

At the breakfast table, Hounslow spoke with a full mouth, a familiar habit Bugg had learned to ignore. "Captain, you know we're low on fuel?"

"Yes."

"No, I mean almost dry."

Bugg turned to Aerma. "Where did you say we were supposed to fight this dragon?"

Aerma lowered her glass of wine. "Upon the eastern march by the River Phaeda."

"But how far from here?"

"Fifty miles, I suppose. More or less."

Hounslow shook his head. "Maybe enough fuel to get there if the terrain isn't too rough, but we wouldn't have anything left to maneuver. We'd be stuck flat."

"We'll have to find some fuel, then," muttered Bugg. "Somewhere we'll have to find fuel."

Aerma was naked. Bugg was divesting himself of the last bits of clothing. A noxious odor arose from a dozen strategically placed incense burners. The alchemy chamber was darkened by heavy, black velvetine drapes.

Aerma inspected Bugg now that he was wholly naked. Her eyes fell on the wedding band still on his finger. "What have you there?"

Bugg shrugged uneasily. "In my land it is a badge of fortitude, endurance, little more." Bugg remembered his wife Grace, the memory devoid of emotion. Their marriage had died almost aborning. Outwardly it still flourished, a satisfaction to relatives and friends, but Grace loved Grace and had little room for Morton Bugg. At first he had responded by burying himself in lin-

guistic studies. Later he had become more pragmatic and, without guilt or remorse, he had sought other women.

But the other women had been no more than salve on the wounds left by Grace. Aerma promised a cure. For that cure, Bugg thought, he might willingly give up much.

"Remove the ring," Aerma said, "we must both be in a state of nature if the pentagram is to function in an unspoiled flux."

Bugg removed the ring, tossed it onto a table, and joined Aerma inside the pentagram etched into the black basalt floor. Aerma's brows knit as she recalled the difficult spell. Her face held an aurora of light, like a moth before flame.

Aerma lifted her arms as if they were wands. "Banatir, Caracrau, Dedos, Etinarmi!"

A sourceless light blushed about the pentagram, lit the black curtains and made them seem to flow like purple ink. Aerma painted a collage of motions before her in the air, then hissed between clenched teeth. The air became charged with a static that made Bugg's skin tingle as if it were being nibbled by tiny fish. Aerma's hair rose majestically from her shoulders, formed a nimbus of blackness about her head. Bugg felt his hair undertake a similar feat.

"Xilka, Xilka, Besa, Besa!"

The walls of the chamber, the floor beyond the pentagram, all vanished to be replaced by a vast ca-

vern of glimmering limestone. From distant places came the red glow of energy, the mephitic odor of brimstone. Bugg involuntarily stepped nearer to Aerma as three, tall, spindly demons advanced, shining like gun metal in their sweat. Two hung back at a distance of fifteen feet. The third strode forward with practiced dignity.

The third demon halted just outside the pentagram, bowed deeply, then spoke in an argot Bugg understood only as gibberish. Bugg was carefully ignored, as if he were beneath notice.

"Aerma of the Bidderfrost! An unexpected visitation, but a pleasant one. How fares your dragon?"

Aerma's small nostrils pinched white. "Well, you should know, swindler. I bargain for a dragon and I receive men in a trinket!"

The demon Bogomiles put on a face of spiritual anguish. "My Lady of the Bidderfrost, I am chagrined that you malign me thus after I did render your father such long and devoted service."

"Only because you knew my father would render your deceptions transparent," snorted Aerma.

Bogomiles feigned abashment. "I feel your accusations must certainly be the product of a distraut mind, stemming from the recent demise of your progenitor."

Aerma tapped her foot impatiently. "We will consider the matter as closed. I have improvised, and the

bogus dragon will do if you can procure the drink it requires for locomotion."

The demon pressed spidery fingers together. "Then the Lady of Bidderfrost wishes to bargain?"

"Indeed, and with honesty on both sides this time."

A lengthy dialogue ensued. Twice Aerma nodded toward Bugg. Twice the demon gave the captain appraising glances. Finally the bargain was struck. The demons would provide the fluid described to Aerma by Bugg; Aerma would, in turn, provide eight bushels of peaches, a fruit for which the demons displayed an astonishing weakness.

Bogomiles and his realm began to fade as the pentagonal vortex decomposed. "Remember," the archdemon cried, "the peaches must be eximious, succulent, full and rich with the essence of sun and soft rains.

"And remember, now, no worms or bruised spots!" The reedy demon voice vanished with the vision.

Aerma was in a rare rage. "May each peach rot forever upon his unctuous palate!"

Bugg sat upon one of twenty-four cases of Jim Beam neatly stacked in the palace courtyard. Hounslow had opened another case and was in the process of opening a bottle, showing neither concern nor regret.

"I don't think they were trying

to cheat us, these demons of hers," said Rycott, flashing a palisade of white teeth amid dusky features. "I think they just misunderstood what we wanted. They could've swiped a few fuel drums as easily as this store of whisky."

Bugg nodded agreement. "You could be right, Raymond. The fuel requirements went through two translations before they reached the demons. We had plenty of room for error."

"Error be damned," laughed Hounslow. "There ain't no better whiskey than this here."

Hounslow turned to Aerma, her mouth still drawn thin and white with anger. "Here, little princess or whatever you are. Try some of old Jim Beam here and things will look a lot better."

Aerma took the bottle from Hounslow, then took such a swallow that even Hounslow was made to blink. Immediately, she began to spit, cough, and then, finding her voice, to curse.

"Vile!" sputtered Aerma. "Do all the people in your land drink the bile of demons? Only a dragon would have a taste for such as this!"

Hounslow would have risen in defense of whiskey, but Zaktovik cut him short. "She's right, Captain! That stuff is one hundred twenty proof! It's got enough alcohol to fuel the turbine!"

Bugg turned to Hounslow. "You are the mechanic, Dutch. Will it

work?"

"Yeah, I think so. It'll work for a few days, maybe." Hounslow held his bottle close, protectively, as if it were a baby.

Bugg slapped his green fatigues with an air of decision. "Alright, then, fill her tanks with that hijacked whiskey. We'll find out for sure if she's really got an all-fuel engine!"

The terrain between Bidderfrost Castle and the eastern marches was similar to the point of duplication. The Sheridan topped a low promontory, stopped, its engine making sounds like a man with a bad throat, thus far the only indication that it was fueled with whiskey instead of kerosene. A mile to the east, a weaving slash of blue marked the River Phaeda. Upon a portion of the grassy west bank, the Bidderfrostian army was arranged in a splayed coruscation of armor and weaponry. On the east bank where the river might easily be forded, Ghotter Phael's army was similarly arrayed. Both armies were ready, having established their camps days earlier. With the arrival of their dragons, the armies would collide with deadly formality.

Hounslow treaded the Sheridan downslope, approaching the right flank of the Bidderfrost force. From the open cupola hatch, Bugg used his binoculars to scan Ghotter's army. In a moment, Bugg found the

man he reckoned to be Ghotter, a small, plump man astride a massive roan. The wizard lord was making what seemed abrupt snatching motions at the air. He twisted in his saddle. Bugg followed the direction of his gaze with the binoculars.

A fly speck came into the glasses, grew to a grotesque bird shape, grew larger still. Bugg lowered the binoculars. His hands were clammy with sweat. For the second time in his life, Bugg knew the stark intimacy of terror.

"My God!" breathed Hounslow.

In the tank's belly, Bugg heard Rycott and Zaktovik scrambling for a look through Hounslow's periscope.

The dragon was now plain to the naked eye. Its body was vast, blimp-like; the neck serpentine, terminating in a mass of leather and wedge-shaped bone that was a head. Its wings were like uprooted circus tents, flapping hurricaneously, gulping half the sky in each sweep. It wheeled high above river and armies like an airliner in a standby holding pattern, the feral crescents of its eyes studying the Bidderfrostians below.

On pinions that made the air weep, it fell down the sky toward the Bidderfrostian phalanx, cowering behind its shield wall. Suddenly the monster banked, shadowing a portion of the Bidderfrostian ranks. In that instant, it breathed a gaseous breath that was ignited by a flinty

growth in the roof of its mouth. Burning warriors writhed in agony. Grass was carbonized or set to flame. Ghotter's army cheered noisily while the Bidderfrostsians stoically resolved themselves to death.

Bugg felt a deep, black hate well up. "Rycott! Kill that flying toad!"

The turret swung around obediently upon its traversing ring. The muzzle of the 105mm elevated with the soft hiss of hydraulics. Bugg's hands tightened upon the firing stud of the 20mm machine gun.

The first shell missed the xenovolant and instead exploded in a meadow three miles to the east. The second missed as well. Bugg slammed his fist against the lip of the hatch as the dragon descended upon the Bidderfrostsian army for a second fiery assault. More men fell, tattered with flames.

"Rycott," shouted Bugg, "see that candy-striped pavilion on the east bank? Yeah, that one. Put a shell in it. We'll give Ghotter a taste of his own medicine."

A moment later, the 105mm shell left a crater where the tent had been. Flying shards of tent poles and debris slashed Ghotter's bare face. He picked himself up bloody from where his terrified horse had left him, and shouted harsh commands at the xenovolant.

"God save us, here it comes!" roared Hounslow.

The 105mm cannon elevated in

a haste of metal. Bugg's 20mm machine gun chattered ineffectually as did Hounslow's 50 cal. The sky was gone. Now there was only the dragon, its belly a sleek mustard color. Its back and sides were lime green, flushing verdigris over bunched muscle and compacted scale. Night was in its wings, fulgent with yellow veins.

The 105mm sent a shudder the length of the tank just as the xenovolant made an abrupt veer in its flight. Bugg dived into the Sheridan's interior, slamming the hatch just as the beast flashed overhead. Bugg felt the impenetrable heat even inside the air-conditioned tank.

"We can't take much of that!" worried Zaktovik.

The lenses in the command periscope had been shattered by the heat. Bugg reluctantly popped the hatch and rose to look out. The steaming hatch rim burned his arm, but Bugg had no time to attend the pain. The dragon was wheeling for a second attack.

"Ninety degree right rotation! He's coming back!"

The creature's left wing was torn where the shell had passed through thin membrane without exploding, but the dragon was hardly crippled. The 105mm boomed once, twice, missed by inches. Bugg cursed, then sounded, slamming the cupola shut just as the Sheridan was napalmed by Ghotter's dragon.

"Damnit!" cursed Rycott. "Just

one clean hit! We'd knock it out of the sky!"

Bugg was not so sure, but for the sake of morale he was silent. The xenovolant made three more passes, was missed three more times, burned the tank each time. Although the airconditioner had been turned to full power, the men were beginning to feel like steamed clams.

The 105mm snarled as the dragon returned. The shell detonated amid sarcous tissue, bone, cartilage, iron scale. The dragon fell in a helioid, tumbling down to land thrashing amid a copse of trees. With talons like great hay hooks, it tore trees up by their roots in a primitive display of hate and agony.

"Now, Rycott! Now! Kill it before it recovers!"

The turret spun, the barrel depressed elevation, boomed. Ten rounds later, Bugg was reasonably sure that the dragon was dead. Now it was little more than a charred mountain of flesh amid slivered trees.

Bugg poked his head and shoulders out of the cupola hatch and spoke with a voice drained of feeling. "Raymond, put a couple of rounds into Ghotter's camp, not close enough to kill anyone, but near enough to prevent him from misunderstanding the situation."

An hour later, Bugg and his crew sat or reclined on the Sheridan's cupola and skirting plates. Ghotter Pheal's army had abandoned its

camp with astonishing swiftness. Now the army was hastening away toward the horizon that marked Ghotter's kingdom. Somewhere among his men was Ghotter, afume with impotent rage. Bugg smiled at the thought.

The Bidderfrostians, assured that their foe had lost all taste for conquest, were themselves dismantling their position. As Bugg watched, a young warrior separated himself from the camp and galloped toward Bidderfrost. Again Bugg smiled. Aerma would know of her victory well before the tank's return.

Bugg dropped to the ground, climbed the spine of the hill to a higher vantage. With a hand he shaded his eyes against the afternoon sun and studied Ghotter's army. The soldiers still in sight were few and distant, the rest having already vanished among low hills.

Bugg returned to the Sheridan. As he approached, he found Hounsflow speaking animatedly to Rycott and Zaktovik, punctuating his words with emphatic gestures.

Hounsflow turned to Bugg. "Captain, you ever think of getting married?"

"Married? I am married. You know that."

Hounsflow grinned slyly. "Not here, you ain't."

"Marry Aerma?" asked Bugg, voicing his own half-formed plan.

Hounsflow's voice became conspiratorial. "Yeah, marry Aerma.

I've seen the way you two been fooling around."

Bugg's face reddened with anger.

Rycott made a conciliatory gesture. "Hell, Captain, Hounslow just means to say Aerma seems to go for you. As far as women go, we've all been having our fun."

Bugg nodded slowly. "So what exactly are you getting at?"

"We want to stay," answered Rycott, his dark face betraying a hint of guilt.

"Yeah, Captain," chimed in Zaktovik. "We go back with that tank, scorched and full of whiskey, and they'll throw our asses in Leavenworth for sure!"

"We'd be deserting," Bugg pointed out.

Hounslow's voice became edged with sarcasm. "That's one thing we *don't* have to worry about. How the hell would anybody ever find us?"

"The idea is still crazy," insisted Bugg, shaking his head.

"Don't give us that," Hounslow laughed harshly, "you've been playing with the same idea all along. One night with Aerma and you were ready to say to hell with the wife and your precious professorship."

"Alright, so I was," Bugg snapped, "I'm crazy, too."

"Like a fox," said Hounslow, leaning against the paint-blistered Sheridan. "With Sherry here we're a match for any dragon that's ever been hatched."

"I doubt that," said Bugg, "but assuming it were true, what'd we do when we ran out of ammunition or the turbine broke down and we needed parts?"

"That's where you come in, Captain. As you've explained it, Aerma's a poor magician because she's not too good a talker in this demon lingo."

"Yes, in a sense she's poor in their language," agreed Bugg. "And this language—the demon language—must be fully understood if one is to be a capable magician."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Hounslow. "You marry Aerma. You become the mystic."

"Then, if we need anything," added Rycott, "you can get it from the demons. With your background in languages, it should be child's play to learn another."

Bugg studied the three men. "Granted, it is feasible. But are you sure that's what you want? If we stay, we'll have to adjust to a culture wholly alien to our own. We may be disappointed later, and find there's no longer a way home."

"To hell with home," growled Hounslow. "I'm just a mechanic there. Here I'll be something special."

Rycott grinned. "I'd stay for the women if nothing else."

Zaktovik looked at the tank-chewed earth. "I don't want to end up in Leavenworth."

Hounslow nudged Bugg with an

elbow. "Don't let the kid fool you. "He's hot for the women, too."

Toward evening, Bidderfrost Castle came into view. Already the tank had been sighted. A number of persons could be seen upon the castle walls, Aerma among them. At her right stood the warrior Bugg had earlier seen riding from the Bidderfrostian camp. At her left stood the artist Mindrell. As the Sheridan drew nearer, Bugg could see both faces more clearly; each man covertly eyeing the other in a manner out of keeping with the recent victory. Aerma, paying neither any heed, raised her arm in greeting. Bugg returned the wave, tracing the future in his imagination.

The Sheridan coughed and sputtered through the castle gate.

But not into the courtyard.

A curse from Hounslow reverberated through the tank's interior. Hounslow locked both treads on the Sheridan. It wheezed to a stop,

reeking of whiskey and cordite.

Bugg gazed about him, bewildered by the suddenly familiar aspect of the orange and sienna evening.

Inside, Rycott pressed an eye to a view slit. "We're back on earth! Arizona!"

"We been screwed!" spat Hounslow. "I never did trust that broad."

The sound of a distant motor penetrated the growing darkness. Headlights delineated a ridge with flaring light. A floodlight splashed over the desert in a tangle of brightness and writhing shadows, then found the Sheridan:

"A search party," Rycott muttered needlessly.

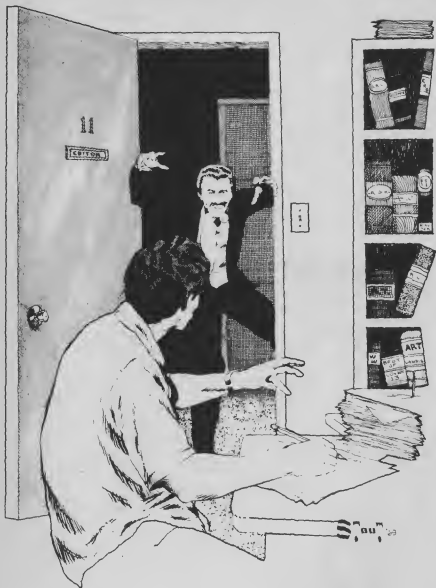
Hounslow cursed thickly. "Damn them demons to hell."

Wishing Aerma her own place in hell, Bugg climbed from the cupola and stood upon the Sheridan's skirting plate, full in the light of the approaching halftrack.

"Leavenworth," wept Zaktovik.



SUBSCRIBE—COVEN 13!





I, VAMPIRE!

By Pronzini/Wallman

Illustrated by William Stout

We, too, rejected the manuscript mentioned herein. However, we are not so foolish as to think that the author is not a man of his word. If our rejection of his work leads us to the fate of Mr. Retnick, let these memoes tell the world why...

Cover letter, dated June 15, 1969, with submission of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, to Thomas Retnick, Editor, CURRENT Magazine, 417 East 56th Street, New York City:

My dear sir,

I am a vampire, and enclosed herewith is my story. It is, as you will no doubt agree once you have

read it, the great work of this or any other century.

Our race is reticent by nature, preferring quiet and calm retreats to the impossible pace of your mortal world. Because of this, we have allowed ourselves to become the most maligned and abhorred of minorities. Prejudice against us has steadily risen to a fevered terror

over the years, and I have long felt it time to put an end to the rumors and whispers, and to fully publicize our glorious heritage. We, too, have hopes and desires, dreams and struggles, and they must be given the universal recognition so long denied us. I, VAMPIRE, then, is not only my story—but the story of a proud and distinguished race as well.

Thus, after forty-three years of laborious effort, I submit this chronicle to you. I am certain you will recognize the incalculable contribution to history I have made here, and will present it to your 17 million mortal readers across the globe with all due exaltation.

You will kindly send all correspondence pertaining to I, VAMPIRE, by Western Union Night Letter; and do not, under any circumstances and for obvious reasons, divulge my whereabouts. Y'r M'st Ob'd'nt S'rv'nt,
Peter Lewis
c/o General Delivery
Boonville (Adirondacks)

Accompanying mimeographed note, undated, with return of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, bearing letterhead of CURRENT Magazine and addressed to Peter Lewis, c/o General Delivery, Boonville (Adirondacks):

Dear Contributor:

Thank you for submitting the enclosed material, which has been given a careful reading by our edi-

torial staff. Unfortunately, it does not meet our present requirements.

We hope you will continue to think of us with further submissions.

Cordially,

Thomas Retnick, Editor

Postscript (Rubber Stamp):

We do not use fiction.

Post-postscript (in ballpoint pen):

Buy yourself a typewriter. Material submitted in scratchy longhand will never be considered by any publication, and your use of red ink carries the joke to the point of japery.

Cover letter, dated August 6, 1969, with re-submission of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, addressed to Thomas Retnick, editor, CURRENT Magazine, 417 East 56th Street, New York City:

My dear Sir:

With profound annoyance I have accepted the return of my chronicle, I, VAMPIRE. After reading your enclosed commentary, I am forced to immediate reply.

Sir, to send a printed form of such meaningless patronage can only mean that you have inexplicably failed to consider the monumental import of this work. To intimate that I am having jest, to mock my penmanship and the tools with which I create, and to have the audacity to make the allusion that I, VAMPIRE, is nothing more than fiction are each cynical repudiations not only of myself but of my glorious forebears. I cannot reiterate

strongly enough that what I have written is the true and moving story of an immortal species. Surely, sir, this should be self-evident to any mortal of even mean intelligence.

Therefore, I am resubmitting I, VAMPIRE, and I assume that this time you will carefully read it in its proper perspective, and treat it accordingly. Once again, I urge you to send all correspondence via Western Union Night Letter.
Y'r M'st O'bd'nt S'rv'nt,
Peter Lewis

Accompanying mimeographed note, undated, with return of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, bearing letterhead of CURRENT Magazine and addressed to Peter Lewis, c/o General Delivery, Boonville (Adirondacks):

Dear Contributor:

Thank you for submitting the enclosed material, which has been given a careful reading by our editorial staff. Unfortunately, it does not meet our present requirements.

We hope you will continue to think of us with further submissions.

Cordially,
Thomas Retnick, Editor
Postscript (in ballpoint pen):
Why flog a dead cow?

Cover letter, dated September 17, 1969, with resubmission of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, addressed to Thomas Retnick, Editor, CUR-

RENT Magazine, 417 East 56th Street, New York City:
Sir:

I submitted I, VAMPIRE, to your publication in all earnestness and good faith, expecting a response in keeping with the magnitude of this unprecedented chronicle. Instead, both my work and I have been subjected to the most intolerable vilification.

You ridicule I, VAMPIRE by sending the same contemptible printed form a second time, and then compound this degradation with implications of sadistic brutality toward dumb animals, a practice I hold in the most loathsome disgust.

Nevertheless, I must achieve publication in your mortal world for reasons which I have carefully detailed in I, VAMPIRE, and I will therefore overlook your display of contempt. With the forbearance which has long marked my race, I will allow you one final opportunity to treat my work with the respect it so richly deserves.

As I have twice requested, and which you have for some incomprehensible reason twice ignored, send all correspondence by Western Union Night Letter. You must realize that regular mail delivery has the same nuisance value to me as though a mortal such as yourself were awakened at two o'clock in the morning. Until I hear from you further, I remain, sir,
Y'r M'st Ob'd'nt S'rv'nt,

I, VAMPIRE

Peter Lewis

Accompanying telegram, dated October 6, 1969, with return of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, via Western Union Night Letter (COLLECT), addressed to Peter Lewis, c/o General Delivery, Boonville (Adirondacks):

Would like to drive stake right into heart of matter by saying any further submission of this script will necessitate batting directly into wastebasket STOP Should you desire submission of this trite asinine ridiculous monstrosity elsewhere best of luck STOP But advise get your teeth into something else STOP Yr Mst Obdnt Srvnt,
T. Retnick
CURRENT

News story appearing on Page One, New York Morning Sentinel, for October 9, 1969:

(AP) Thomas J. Retnick, editor of the world famous CURRENT Magazine, was reportedly found dead in his private office at the Current Building, 417 East 56th Street, late last night.

According to the police report, Retnick's confidential secretary, Miss Madeline Gentry, 22, discovered the body when she returned for a forgotten article of clothing at ten-thirty. Miss Gentry, apparently the last person to see Retnick alive when she left him at eight still working on manuscripts, is unavailable for

comment at this time, being under heavy sedation at Memorial Hospital.

There is speculation that Retnick, well-known in literary circles for his caustic sense of humor, met with foul play. Lieutenant Neal Wisnom, of the 29th Precinct, in charge of the investigation, was non-committal when approached by reporters, preferring not to make any statement until a later date. Retnick's office is presently under heavy police guard, and all those connected with the matter have declined comment, thus lending a pervasive aura of mystery to the editor's demise.

Inter-departmental memo, dated October 9, 1969, from Coroner Philip Stallings to Detective Lieutenant Neal Wisnom, 29th Precinct, New York City:

Neal:

Tried to get you on the phone, but you were out. So this is to corroborate what I told you on the scene last night. As grisly, and as impossible, as it may sound, there wasn't a single damned drop of blood left in Thomas Retnick's corpse.

But that isn't the half of it. On my subsequent post mortem, I found two tiny puncture wounds on the side of Retnick's neck, at the point of the jugular vein. And Ted Conradin from the Lab stopped by a few minutes ago to tell me that his boys had run a test on the particles they

found in the nap fibers of the carpeting. They thought at first the particles were bits of dirt, but they turned out to be. . . well, hell, Neal, they turned out to be *bat guano*. Ted swears this is gospel.

I don't want to put into writing the implications of the above facts. I'll be in my office all day if you want to come by and discuss this thing personally.

Phil.

Cover letter, dated October 12, 1969, with submission of manuscript of I, VAMPIRE, to Arthur H. Landis, Editor, COVEN 13 Magazine, 2412 West Seventh Street, Los Angeles, California:

My Dear Sir:

I am a vampire, and enclosed herewith is my story. . . ★

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BELL, BOOK AND TAROT



by Jean Cirrito

About poltergeists who, as everyone knows, committed the original sin of 'going bump in the night.'

Somewhere between the chain dragging ghost of everyman's favorite nightmare and the medium's reluctant shadow of spiritual mist, lies the poltergeist. This troublesome spirit delights in amazing and annoying humans while obstinately refusing to fit nicely into any of our neat categories of what and why. According to the International Institute for Psychical Research, the poltergeist has played his silly, and sometimes frightening, games since 530 A.D.. During more recent years, the phenomenon has come under scientific investigations which have resulted in interesting reading but no explanations.

Poltergeist is a compound German word meaning noisy ghost.

Webster defines the word as a spirit assumed as the explanation of rappings and other unexplained noises. There is a pattern of behavior in these unmotivated, non-human activities which has produced a respectable library of poltergeist literature containing documented accounts of this elusive spirit.

Usually the poltergeist "visits" a house where an adolescent child lives, but this is not always the case since there have been instances of poltergeist visitations in childless homes. I am sure that steadfast believers would argue a case of previous inhabitants, but one must always remember that a poltergeist follows a pattern which we have defined with little help from our

friend. Since a child is usually present in the home, a theory has developed naming the child as the medium or sensitive who acts as the unconscious agent or ally of the poltergeist. There have been cases where a retarded adult or a young woman have been thought to be the mediums.

The household is first introduced to their unwelcome visitor by a series of mysterious knocks. The knocks grow subsequently louder and then objects begin to move; said movements not being confined to the laws of gravity. Chairs and tables raise up and then down, thump! Usually in the path of some non-believer. Objects fly in curves, not in straight paths; they also turn corners, pause in mid-air, and sometimes dance about the room. Next to moving furniture, the 'visitor' delights in throwing stones. Pebbles will sometimes shower down on a person but heavier stones never strike anyone. Bedcovers are a source of great joy to the poltergeist who likes to wait until the family has retired and then pulls the bedcovers off and drops them in a heap on the floor. Any defiance on the part of the sleepy occupant is in vain. Once the poltergeist is entrenched in his new surroundings, the knocking becomes a means of "communicating." He will follow instructions to rap once for yes and twice for no. He will also rap out a popular tune upon request. The poltergeist crosses

the line from mischief maker to menace when he indulges his prankster practice of starting fires. Lighted matches will drop from the ceiling; small bundles of clothing will suddenly burst into flame, and fires will start up in different rooms of the house. The household members will scurry about trying to put out a new fire only to see another one started where they least expect it. The fires are usually minor, and do little if any real damage. But this again is not a set rule since houses and barns have burned down. The major damage done by the poltergeist is usually to property not people, although he will occasionally bite or pinch so hard as to leave marks on the flesh. Sometimes the poltergeist will speak. This adds a final touch of panic to an already terrorized family.

The activities of poltergeists attract most children — especially little boys. To have this Puck-like character around is tempting indeed to high-spirited children. How easy to join the "fun;" tie strings to objects; move them about; disguise one's voice to frighten the sleeping household. Many investigations, as one expert put it, begin with the rule of "*cherchez l'enfant*," when dealing with poltergeist phenomena. This simplification leads to confessions that explain some of the occurrences, but not all. The child will usually join in after the poltergeist has started, and thereby use the

spirit as a cover up. Since so many poltergeist tricks are directed at parents or religious leaders, who come to pray, the child discovers a natural cohort; also the tricks are highly imaginative and, as I have said, more annoying than terrifying. It is obvious to investigators that a child who is the "center" of poltergeist activity cannot be responsible for feats that defy gravity, such as throwing stones that are heavier than the child. So the phenomenon remains unexplained. The poltergeist, *who is immune to exorcism*, usually leaves as unexpectedly as he arrives.

The first investigated instance of poltergeist activity in Britain was at the house of Andrew Mackie who suffered from the spirit's visit from February, 1695, to April 30 of the same year. One astute expert has observed that April 30 is May Eve, an ancient holiday for witches, hinting that perhaps the poltergeist had to attend services. The Mackie house was located in Scotland at Ringcroft. The poltergeist disturbances were witnessed by all the members of the Mackie family, the local church officials, and the neighbors. Reverend Alexander Telfair published the account which included the sworn testimony of everyone involved. The manifestations included the usual knocking, furniture movement, bed clothes dumped, etc.. The stone shower occurred more on Sundays than any other day and prayer-leaders were a prime

target. One pious minister had his wig snatched off as he asked the Lord to help quiet the disturbances.

The story then tells of an earlier tenant, his ill-luck, and his decision to seek the aid of the local witch who tried to help him. The case has all the ingredients of a good who-done-it and deserves to be read. Before the phenomenon ended, the poltergeist "spoke" to Mackie, warning him in religious pomp of the need to repent. This warning has led to a theory that one of the ministers took advantage of the occasion and instigated a few happenings of his own. Also the children seemed to have been involved. But, as in other cases, *all* the disturbances cannot be explained away.

The particulars in the famous Epworth Rectory case have been described by John Wesley in Samuel Wesley's collection of letters from other members of his family and in John's essays. The Wesley poltergeist visited the Rectory in Lincolnshire either in 1716 or 1719, depending on which authority one reads. The servants were the first to hear the knocking: "a most terrible and astonishing noise . . . at the dining-room door." Soon afterwards Hetty, a young daughter of the household, heard noises like footsteps that shook the house. When told of the strange noises, the mother decided to tell the head of the household only if she herself heard

anything. Later the same day her daughters called her into the nursery where she heard a cradle rocking although no cradle was in the room. The mother was convinced that the sounds were made by a spirit from another world. She asked it not to bother her during her evening rest and it most reasonably complied.

The father refused to listen to his family's complaints and lectured the household on superstition. At evening prayers, however, for King George and the Prince, the noises began again above the heads of the family and startled this most pompous 'pater' right down to his natural socks. Since the poltergeist continued this practice, he was considered a Jacobite by the household who seemed to have retained a sense of humor. Soon after the whole family was witness to the activity, the poltergeist acted in pattern: before ten each evening a sound resembling a windmill turning would be heard. This was a signal that disturbances were to begin. The knockings were continuous thereafter. But, though objects could be heard to move about, such as shoes and curtains, none were seen in the act of moving.

Something resembling a badger was once seen under a bed. At one time the father heard the sound of bottles crashing; on another occasion, money was heard falling. One evening Nancy, one of the daughters, sat on her bed and felt it lifted

into the air with her on it. The children seemed to be the special target for the poltergeist. Mr. Wesley finally challenged the spirit to meet with him in his study 'like a man.' The spirit answered with the knock Mr. Wesley usually used at his gate, 1-23456-7, and nothing more was heard for the night. Mrs. Wesley's study was not a usual scene of poltergeist activity until the night after the challenge. As he tried to enter his study, Mr. Wesley was "pushed" violently against the door.

The medium in this case seemed to have been the daughter Hetty who "trembled exceedingly in her sleep" as the poltergeist performed. The poltergeist finally made his leave one evening after visiting for two months.

A more bizarre case is the Great Amherst Mystery. The account left us is by an actor who insisted on the word 'great' in the title of his article, and also insisted on cashing-in on Esther Cox who was the medium. Esther lived with her brother-in-law, Daniel Teed, in his house at Amherst, Nova Scotia, in the year 1879. She was eighteen when the disturbances began. The first sign was movement heard in a box containing sewing material which Esther kept in the room she shared with her sister. When the sisters attempted to investigate this the box jumped into the air from its position on the floor. Other members of the family

saw the same performance the next night.

At an early point in the visitations Esther's body would "swell" as she lay in bed. During her "spells" the usual knockings came, accompanied by loud crashes of thunder from under her bed as she "grew" and moaned in her sleep. Throughout the period of these activities objects continued to move about and the bedcovers — in one case a sheet — jumped around the room. When the disturbances stopped for the night, Esther deflated and slept normally.

The ritual of poor Esther became a neighborhood pastime. In the evening the neighbors would come to watch Esther instead of each other. At one point in this drama, writing appeared on the wall of her room which read "Esther Cox, you are mine to kill." After this writing incident, and what with the arrival of the actor on the scene, most experts agree that the case became something other than academic. The actor convinced Esther to go on the road and amaze people with her tale of haunting. The performance was a flop, however, since no one purchased tickets for the poltergeist; he didn't show up.

It is agreed that Esther helped keep the story fresh with sundry embellishments long after the poltergeist left. But only the early stages of the disturbance are considered worthy of study.

More recent instances include a poltergeist nicknamed Brutus by his tired but defiant owner. *Life* magazine covered the story in 1952. Sam Jones had lived in his house in Run-corn, England, for over fifty years. When the poltergeist arrived knocking, throwing, and committing general mayhem, stubborn Sam decided that he'd stick it out. The article is illustrated with photographs of walls heavily scarred where objects were thrown. The magazine does a straight job of reporting with no theories or history. An eight year old is briefly mentioned as part of the household.

Seaford, Long Island, was the scene of a 1958 visit. One American reporter theorized that a freak magnetic field caused the disturbances, supposedly when jets flew over a deposit of water under the house. Most attempts at poltergeist analysis come from this side of the Atlantic. The Europeans, it would seem, are content to leave well-enough alone. They've had a most generous history of ghosts and castles and such, you see.

One interesting, but hardly realistic theory is that poltergeists are souls in limbo, allowed to roam and play on earth. Hypnotism and ESP are almost always mentioned in poltergeist articles.

Despite all attempts at explanation of the poltergeist to date, our knowledge of the why and what is

still extremely limited. In every recorded case of supernatural disturbances poltergeists are blamed. We submit, however, that this is only

the definition, not the explanation. Perhaps we will know more someday; meanwhile, don't answer any late night knocking.

EDITOR'S CAULDRON

By ARTHUR H. LANDIS

I never thought I'd be reduced to two-thirds of a single page somewhere in the interior of an issue of COVEN 13. In the allocation of space, however, when some things take precedent over others, the Editor's Column is the first to get the axe.

We do have reasons; good ones, too. In short, since our distributor has suggested that we stick with a bi-monthly for another three issues, our Coven (the staff and myself) deemed it only proper to conclude our serial, LET THERE BE MAGICK!, in this issue. In this way we will have cleared the deck for the new COVEN 13 of 1970. Much as we enjoyed our serialized novel— and reader response has placed it among the best of the 'Swords and Sorcery' thrillers— we will now proceed with a format of two feature-length novelettes per issue with, perhaps five shorts, an article, and all of our Departments including BELL BOOK AND TAROT.

We think we have a very good package here.

Some of the manuscripts we have been receiving are the greatest; scared the hell out of our staff. In fact, those of the more timid have requested on occasion to leave the office early, so as to arrive home before dark. We understand. We call it the 'Berkeley Syndrome', ie—paranoia!

Seriously, we do have a great group of stories coming up. We hope to share them with you. IF YOU DON'T SEE US ON YOUR FAVORITE MAGAZINE STANDS, ASK FOR US—LOUD AND CLEAR. Until then, all the best— and yours in the COVEN for 1970.

Arthur H. Landis
Editor/COVEN 13





THE CONVERT

By S.M. Clawson

Illustrated by William Stout

To 'believe' is sometimes not so great a price to pay for one's life — though that 'belief' be not so much in church and altar — but rather in other things . . .

Benjie Stone turned from the blaze in the old stone fireplace. The chill belied the hot kiss of the sun beating through the little leaded window panes but then it was an old chill. Like you open a grave at full noon but down in the moldering ground it's haunting cold. Cold like the iron drawn from the witch fire or like these old stone walls

shivering from the touch of frozen hatred and gelid ghosts.

The black suit was too tight, but father was buried now and Benjie could go back into tweeds. Move all that witching junk out of the tower room tomorrow and start putting in his lab. The last of the Stones and none to say him nay, Benjie thought somberly. The grant from

the university, together with this old rock pile, meant at least a year to work out his ideas in bio-chemistry.

He went over to the bay window and stared through the glass. His spare, bony frame stiffened, his head thrust forward. There, by the foot of the wall around the Bowman house. A squat figure limned solidly by the slant of afternoon sun, with the grey thrust of his field-stone tower and gabled roofs beside him. Another massive shape at his elbow glistened blackly in the slant light. A bovine shape, shaking in the distorted heat waves rising out of the valley.

Twenty years since Benjie had last seen that menacing figure standing rock-still, gazing over Calder Stream and up the slope toward the Stone House. Two hundred and seventy years the two identical masses of grey field-stone had faced each other. Since 1692 when the Puritan fire licked greedily around the witches' feet in Salem. It was then the Bowmans and the Stones came west into these Berkshire Hills, traveling in the dead of the night under cover of spell, bringing nothing but what cannot be left. The censers, the swords, the cauldrons, the scourges, and the wands.

The blood pounded in Benjie's ears, his pale blue eyes watered and he felt once again that pit of anger burning deep inside him. The sight of Hiram Bowman was still like fire

in the pine crowns that crowded down from the hills into Calder Valley. He crossed the room to the heavy oaken door and tugged it open, and went down the slope in heavy, deliberate steps. The squat figures on the other slope moved downward until they came face to face across the brook called Calder Stream.

Hiram in his dusty overalls and shapeless felt hat and Benjie in the rented funeral suit. The solid bull-like Bowman build was the same in Hiram as in all his clan. Benjie was made aware of his own skeletal leanness. There was a curious movement in Hiram's eyes—like golden flecks errantly darting over still, brown pools.

"You are looking in my eyes," Hiram's voice was a low subdued bass. "It is the sign you see. Before I buried Pa he passed me the power. The fire is hot beneath my cauldron but I see only cold ashes in your tower. Perhaps you came too late?"

Though anger surged over him in hot waves, Benjie was diverted by the beast at Hiram's heels. A bull-black, massive, ugly—like a Durham, but no, those wide wicked horns.

The beast turned sideways, swinging his head low over the ground. Gelded, by God, Benjie thought—a damned ox.

"Pa had none of that witch stuff to pass me," Benjie said rough-

ly. "Besides, I wouldn't be interested. Never did believe in it and I don't now."

"I know," Hiram nodded. "Benjie Stone, the famous bio-chemist. Burning would have been too good for you in the old days. I have my craft and you have yours and may the Elders judge. Bio-chemists can't read minds, can they?" Hiram's face spread into a taunting smile.

Benjie stared sullenly. He could feel his toes trying to grip the rocky ground through the soles of his shoes. In a way, he was again an angry boy, twenty years ago, ready to spring over the brook and take one more beating from Hiram's powerful hands. The ox lowed heavily—a sinister bass rumbling.

"I call him OX," Hiram said. "Just OX. He was a good bull but we clashed. He wanted to kill me so I punished him." For a moment their glances crossed, then both turned away. The ox followed Hiram up his slope like a great black dog.

The day was still new in the East the next morning when Benjie heard the grinding of gears dropping down his lane from the Ridge Road. He rose stiffly from the narrow bed of his boyhood. Nothing had changed in his room under the eaves but he knew painfully that the boy was long gone into manhood and the bed was now too short and small. He hadn't expected Orley

Jones with the horse and his Lab things until maybe noon but now he remembered how the hill country people work from 'can see' to 'can't see' to drag a living out of the rocky hills. His stomach rumbled expectantly and Benjie thought longingly of the steaming coffee pot that baptized the mornings in his digs at the University.

"Morning, Benjie," Orley's round moon-face still carried the mask of childish innocence that had served to bail Benjie and him out of many junior escapades. "I'd been here sooner but old Boston wouldn't get in the truck with your stuff and I had to carry him along behind on a rope."

Benjie looked over the broad-backed bay tethered to the tail-gate of the truck. "He'll do fine till I get that little pickup in here, then I'll tether him back to you same way. We'll carry the Lab into the big front room downstairs. I'll have to set up there temporary until the place is wired and the electric's in. Then I want you to help me carry it up into the tower."

Orley stared intently with a flicker of something odd in his hazel eyes. "You fixing to work up there in the witching-room, Benjie?"

"Why hell, yes, Orley. Going to clean out whatever's up there, cut windows in the walls and have me a nice airy Lab. That tower's been wasted long enough on the old mumbo-jumbo."

"You be careful, Benjie," Orley said flatly. "I'm speaking plain, blood brother to blood brother."

Benjie remembered the solemn business of cutting their wrists and mingling the two bloods down in the rushes by Calder Stream. He smiled faintly. "Now come off it, Orley. You know that witchcraft is a lot of damned nonsense. I never been up in that tower since my mother died but I remember her puttering around up there with a rag on her head and a fancy stick in her hand."

"Yes, I know. And how your Pa tried and tried but he'd no touch for it at all. You just be careful. True, the old witch families are dying out but they aren't all gone." He pointed down the slope and over Calder Stream at the towered and gabled hulk of the Bowman hold.

"Him," Benjie said roughly. "You know about that Ox, Orelly?"

"Hiram's a mean bastard," Orley said slowly. "And he has the full power. Benjie, you know I'm no witcher but by God you are. They're all there in the death shade, Benjie, generations of Stones and all on your side. You might want their help real bad with him over there, but if you reject all they ever stood for—why they can't help you. Everybody around here knows that's elementary."

"Let's carry the stuff inside, Orley," Benjie said coldly.

It was past noon before the Laboratory stood in rough form on a long table under the beamed ceiling of the big room. Benjie had shared a can of beans and some instant coffee with Orley Jones and waved him off up the rutted lane. Boston, the broad-backed bay, munched some of the baled hay Orley had left and switched off the flies in one of the old box stalls.

The gleaming beakers, the ranked bottles of chemicals, the fat row of volumes—even the Bunsen burner that was also good for heating beans and making instant coffee were odd to Benjie when set against the time-blackened wainscot walls and the smoke-dark beams of the ceiling. He had already climbed the circular stairs to the tower room and found the door sealed with two-by-fours nailed across it. Now he picked up the wrecking bar they had used to open the crates, lit the Coleman lantern, and went back up the stairs. The bar made short work of the two-by-fours and he pushed the door open.

The white glare of the lantern bit into the musty old darkness, and it was like looking back, way back, into his childhood. He could almost see his hawk-nosed mother bending over the cauldron with a straggle of grey hair loose from beneath the headband—or there at that old blackened table molding something from the blue clay found

in the bed of Calder Stream.

Now, his eyes adjusted to see by the lantern light, he realized that mostly the vision was gone. There was the cauldron overturned in a corner with her fancy stick—the wand she called it—lying beside it. The old table still stood solidly in the middle of the circular room, adorned only by a rude figurine mantled in dust. He brought the lantern close and recognized the thing as a likeness of a Bowman—whether old Cyrus or Hiram, he could not tell.

A long, vicious thorn was driven through the figurine in the anatomical vicinity of the heart. Benjie felt the quick, choking rise of anger flood along his veins. This was the thing that had eaten his father's heart out and blackened all of his days for many years. He raised the wrecking bar and reduced the molded clay to shards with one fierce blow.

Now, all at once, the dust seemed to leap and quiver, the very room to vibrate and shiver in a fierce wave of biting cold. Benjie shook his head stubbornly as he backed out and pulled the door shut. Have to clean that place out good, he then thought. Dust makes a man light-headed. God only knows what's in it.

The valley held a long, white swirl of mist the next morning when Benjie came out of the pillared ve-

randa. Hiram's towered stronghold rose out of the white fog on the far side like a misplaced scene from some medieval dream. He took a measure of oats from the barrel and broke a small piece from the slab of rock-salt to carry over to the barn for Boston. The bay nickered softly when he came into the stall. Benjie patted his square, fat shoulder and enjoyed the soft touch of Boston's muzzle in the palm of his hand as he took the salt.

He saw the bloody thing fastened to the rough oak of the door when he came back to the house and climbed the steps to the veranda. The blackened, sooty nail that held it was so hard-driven that his bare hand could not free it. He brought the wrecking bar and ripped the gory mess from the door.

His trained eye knew the shape and texture of a sheep's heart. They did not come from the sheep all skewered through with thorns. Thirteen, he counted. Long, black, and ugly. Dimly he remembered his mother's chanting voice naming this thing as the sign of a death wish said through the smoke of the cauldron when the devil's brew was boiling. He flung it off the wrecking bar to fall over the veranda rail and stomped into the house.

The day waxed and waned as Benjie pattered at the Lab table trying to re-enter the problem that sounded so simple in the spare wording of the University grant. Discov-

ering a method of altering the genetic chain so that favorable mutations could be achieved in one animal generation. He believed that switching hormones in the male sperm would do it, and the solutions he had in the tubes buried in dried boxes were approaching a point of discovery. But nothing much would be done to further it until the electron microscope was working again. He hoped to need the experimental animals soon, now.

Evening softness was creeping into the valley when he heard an odd thumping outside. He swung the door open and saw the black ox with his forefeet planted on the veranda floor. "What you want, Ox?" Benjie said softly, knowing that most animals enjoy a soft, human voice.

The ox rumbled deep in his cavernous chest and watched Benjie with his mild eyes where the brown iris contrasted so startlingly with the milky white rounds of the eyeballs. Benjie went over to the salt sack and brought out a good-sized slab. The ox lowed urgently and tried to heft his pounds on to the flooring. "Poor devil is salt-starved." Benjie muttered as he watched the greedy licking and muzzling of the salt. At last, when twilight was gathering, the ox went down the slope to Calder Stream, his muzzle rimmed with flecks of the rock salt. Benjie watched him ford the brook and move slowly up the slope to-

ward the Bowman hold.

It was about the same time in the next afternoon when Benjie again heard the odd thumping sound on the veranda. It was the remembered sound of the ox with his forefeet on the edge of the veranda, but to Benjie's bio-chemist mind, trained to exacting comparisons, there was a mutation in the sound—an altered tempo.

He got up from the laboratory table, turned the Bunsen flame low, and went out. It was indeed the ox with his forefeet again planted on the edge of the veranda, but today he was not the eager seeker of salt. His eyes were still wide and mild under the wicked spread of his horns, but he neither sniffed nor lowed. There was a certain trance-like stiffness about him and he carried a lettered board apparently wired between his horns.

Benjie stepped out of the doorway and approached the ox until the uniformly thick, runic lines of the lettering became readable. "You have salted my ox," it read. "Part of his punishment was no salt. Now he knows you have no right and he will not eat your salt. I have warned him and now I warn you. Beware, fool. Think of the tokens you have had and—beware."

"I'll be damned," Benjie said slowly. "Ox, he's sure done something to you. Some kind of an injection, maybe—" Benjie stiffened

at that moment. A blank glazed shine veiled his eyes. Noticed before by several of his colleagues and jokingly named "Benjies' Trance," it invariably meant that a new and likely novel thought was about to be brought forth.

"It's too bad you don't have your old pizzazz," he told the ox. "You could give that bastard something to do except pester me." Benjie turned slowly, lifted Boston's tether rope from the top of the oats sack, and fastened it loosely around the ox's neck. "You just stay here," he said, while he tied the other end of the tether to a veranda pillar.

Benjie went back in to the lab and began a furious leafing through massive volumes, a perusal of hormone tables, and finally a collection of vials from the dry-iced boxes. He brewed a concoction over the Bunsen burner, cooled it in a nest of dry ice, and sucked it up into a veterinary syringe.

The ox still waited when he brought the syringe and received the thrust of the needle without even a switch of his tail. Benjie watched him for some minutes, and thought he detected a red rim collecting around the whites of the eyes, but twilight was deepening and it was hard to tell. The ox turned away as soon as Benjie took the tether off his neck. He went slowly to the brook, stopped to drink, flung his head up once, gave out an

echoing bellow and went up the slope toward the Bowman house in a pounding run.

Benjie went in, lit the Coleman lantern, filled his pipe, and sat down with his feet up on the Lab table. Occasionally he chuckled briefly, wondering what ghastly token might be nailed to the door tomorrow morning or what Hiram would make of the ox's new pizzazz. After a while, he stirred restlessly. It was the way the ox had bellowed and gone roaring up that slope. Damn it, he couldn't shake the feeling. Maybe he had gone too far. At last he got his Colt automatic from the table drawer, slipped it under his belt, and took the lantern out to the box stall. His mind worried the thing over while he bridled Boston, and the feeling of urgency built up so that he didn't wait to put the saddle on but went bareback down to the stream, holding the rein in one hand and the lantern in the other.

The Bowman house was a blacker shadow in a dark sky when Benjie and Boston skirted the stone wall until a gateless opening let them into the door-yard. They advanced between the house and the barn in the center of the bright circle of light from the high-held lantern. A lumpish mound on the turfless, hoof-marked ground crept into the edge of the light circle and Benjie guided the horse toward it.

"Good God," Benjie whispered. He knew that the mangled mound

of flesh lying there on the rutted ground was all that remained of Hiram Bowman. The shapeless old felt hat stamped into the ground beside the ruined head gave silent witness to the fury of the violence passed.

Something moved at the edge of light. Benjie lifted the lantern and saw the ox, forefeet spread wide, horns dreadfully died crimson, tail arched high over his broad back. The ox lifted his head high and Benjie saw the sign. There, in the ox's terrible eyes, glittering in the lantern shine, golden flecks of luminescence darted back and forth in crazy, errant patterns.

"Hiram," Benjie said, his loud, strained voice echoing into the darkness. "Christ no, it can't be!"

The ox gave out a great triumphant bellow and surged forward. He was almost upon them before the fat old bay reared, pivoted, and broke away. Benjie's legs could hardly grasp the fat round of the horse's sides. He flung the lantern

backwards and the gyrating circle of light vanished in the moil of flying earth beneath the ox's hooves.

There, in the pit-like darkness, ears ringing, with the thunder of hoofed feet, dizzy in the lurching swing of Boston's frantic flight, Benjie's mind ran the gamut of things possible and found death the sole answer. The Hiram-ox was at their heels and the stone wall lay before them in the darkness. Only some power other than man and horse could lift their combined mass over such an obstacle. Were all his people waiting to help him, like Orley said? Held back only by his stubborn faithlessness?

"I believe!" he shouted into the flying darkness. "I believe!"

The sudden surging lift and spring in the horse's gallop, the stone wall flowing under the arch of their tremendous bound, all seemed normal in a world where witches watch their own from the death shade. ★

SUBSCRIBE!— COVEN 13

FEACH AIR MUIR LIONADHI
GEALACH BUIDHE MAR OR

Robert E. Howard

Mananan Mac Lir
The son of the sea
Is sib unto me
At the break of the year

In the white autumn tides
The ghost drums call
When the midnights fall
And a ghost ship rides
Where the green waves crawl

I break the loam
By a Kerry hill—
They beckon me still
Through the purple gloam;
Strange eyes in the foam.

The sea-wind chills
The crumbling stones,
And a ghost harp moans
In the shadowy hills.
But a white sail fills
And a sweep-head drones

The great white oars
They gleam and bend
And the west wind roars
From the blue world's end
They call like a friend
Forgotten shores.

A shadowy white
Mist of starlight
Swirls about me;
I am drawn in the night
To the roads of the sea.





the thing on the stairs

By Lee Chater

Illustrated by William Stout

A foxfire duel with a cast from the Grand Guignol. This one should keep your fingers on your pulse...

Talbot Were, Squire of Were Haven, had something rather special in the way of entertainment planned for his cousin, Rockleigh, who was to be his guest for the weekend. He intended to murder him.

Rockleigh, racing down from London in a red Jaguar, was the very model of a modern weekend guest, having thoughtfully provided

himself with a selection of gifts for his host. That they were all lethal gave them, in Rockleigh's eyes, an added value. He was also bringing his fiancée, an unusual ballerina named Lilit, for the approval of the head of the family. Since Talbot had no heir of his body, a marriage between his cousin and Lilit presented not only a threat but an

insolent challenge. No Were ever refused a challenge, so a rather untidy weekend would have been unavoidable—had it not been for the Watchet. No matter how many people died, by fair means or foul, at Were Haven, there were never any awkward corpses lying about to cause comment. The Watchet saw to that.

The Weres had lived in their imposing jumble of a mansion for a very long time indeed. There was, beneath the wine cellar, a comfortable cavern with a secret runway out to a marshy fen, where members of the family occasionally retired in their true form to wait out the attempts at reprisal by their outraged human neighbors, or the witchhunts of the militant godly.

It was hard for the average mortal to tell the Weres apart when they were manifesting their human aspect. They looked alike as scorpions look alike, with variations only in size and color, and, in spite of being were-wolves, they looked completely human. Their other aspect—well, folklore and mythology contain elaborate descriptions of it, but neither Talbot nor Rockleigh intended ever to be seen in his natural shape. The possibilities for refined depravity were so much more varied and interesting when one wore his human guise that Tab and Rock seldom bothered to revert, even in secret, to the more limited lupine form. The family had, in a manner of speaking, passed for hu-

man for so many centuries that they had come to regard themselves as the genuine article, and considered *homo sapiens* as a very rudimentary and underdeveloped organism indeed. Talbot did, in fact, assume his natural form at one point during the weekend, but this was done under stress of an emotion common to all males, lupine or human.

While younger members and white wolves of the clan sometimes sought their fortunes in other lands, the head of the family always remained in England, where there was a robust, barnyard flavor of earthy decay which titillated the sophisticated palate. When the Celts came sailing across the Channel for fun and gains with the local yokels, they found the Weres established at Were Haven and doing a rousing business in murder, pillage, and rapine. In fact, Sigmund Were's operating techniques made the invaders look like kindly maiden aunts on an errand of mercy. When the Normans, no slouches themselves at the manly art of mayhem, arrived to liberate the Britons, they were compelled to acknowledge that Godefroy Were made their best efforts seem like child's play. They gave the family a wide and respectful berth, and prudently neglected to list them in the Domesday Book, good tax collectors being difficult to replace.

Not that the Weres were flam-

boyant. Here a peasant racked, there a family burned alive in its beds, but never an enthusiasm so excessive as to frighten away too much potential material. The Were talent was, you might say, raised to Art by loving exercise and care.

Although all the Weres were gifted, some few stood out particularly. There was bluff, rosy-cheeked old Squire George Were, for instance, who bartered his soul to the Devil for the Watchet. This beastie, all eyes and sucking mouths, was a choice item even in Hell. While it could and did digest anything, it had an insatiable appetite for intangibles, like souls and vital essences in general. After it had become a fixture at Were Haven, the servants moved about like deft and soulless automatons, which indeed they had become. George Were, however, waxed fatter and more rubicund. As the Devil discovered to his chagrin, George had no soul to lose; in point of fact, the deal had been such a sharp one that His Infernal Majesty needed all his age-old cunning to get out of it with horns, tail, and hide intact. George was disappointed. The Great Hall at Were Haven boasted many fine antlered heads, and the Devil's would have added a nice touch of color in that dark corner near the foot of the stairs.

Those stairs figured often in the more pedestrian activities of the Weres. Trippings, pushings, clutch-

ings at ankle-height through a panel, these had accounted for a good few wealthy visitors, as well as prying members of the local constabulary. The stairs were steep, broad, dully-gleaming from generations of climbing feet and falling bodies, and they were, of course, uncarpeted. Such a useful slipway should not be rendered harmless with drapings of wool or velvet. One other virtue they had. From the doorway of the master bedroom at the head of the stairs, the Squire of Were Haven could overlook the precipitous descent with proprietary satisfaction.

The current Squire, Talbot Were, stood looking down the stairs with that very emotion of the Friday afternoon in question. He was as infernally beautiful as a fallen angel, his countenance as guileless and luminous as stained glass. He awaited his cousin Rockleigh with some impatience. He had never met his heir, whose mother had prudently raised him at a healthy distance from the ancestral mansion. At this moment the Watchet, invisible of course, whispered that cousin Rockleigh approached.

Talbot carefully descended the stairs on the safe side, and prepared to welcome his guests. Servants swung the massive doors wide. Talbot strolled out onto the sunny, flagged terrace. A blood-red Jaguar snarled up the gravelled drive and growled to a halt and Talbot looked

beyond his cousin into the liquid black eyes of Lilit. Sinuous as a snake, she swung her fantastic long legs out of the car and started up the stone steps toward Talbot. Offshoot of an old Hungarian family with a dubious title, she presented the curious exaggeration of certain characteristics, which is the result of centuries of inbreeding. Her hair was a fur-soft mane of black with reddish highlights, her teeth were oddly triangular in shape and very sharp, and her small pink tongue flickered perpetually over red, wet lips. She wasn't every man's jug of wine, thought Talbot, but then no ordinary female would have attracted Rockleigh. Talbot released her hand and turned to welcome his cousin.

Rockleigh was a hard-fleshed, arrogant blond stallion of a man with a terrific jaw and round, hot eyes. The cousins sized each other up warily. There was no doubt in either mind that only one of them would survive the weekend. The Watchet whispered in Talbot's ear that the girl was hostile to him, that all of her perverse loyalty was pledged to Rockleigh. Tab shrugged. He found her attractive, but not sufficiently so as to influence his decision that both of the visitors must die. He moved directly to the attack.

Clapping his cousin heartily on the shoulder, he said, "Come in, come in! You'll be thirsty after

your drive. . .! Donal, a cup of cheer to welcome our honored guests!"

Taking the frosty, silver mugs from the tray presented by a blank-faced servant, Tab pressed the sparkling beverage on the girl and Rockleigh in the sacred name of hospitality. Rockleigh, who was parched after his drive, lifted his mug greedily, but Lilit jogged his arm, spilling some of the liquid onto the polished top of the table. It hissed and smoked and ate deep into the wood. Tab grinned ruefully, and Rock, after a startled instant, laughed aloud.

"Might have expected you to have a warm welcome for me, Cousin Tab," he chuckled. "No hard feelings, eh? Mother sent you a present." He held out a foil-wrapped box.

Tab ripped it open and inhaled the fruity richness of liqueur chocolates, a passion of his. Choosing a plump, dark beauty, he walked to an open case and whistled. At once a lean, savage hound came leaping. Talbot tossed the chocolate and the dog gulped it down. The visitors exchanged glances. The dog screamed and thrashed in convulsive agony.

"That was my best hound," Tab shook his head. "Tell your mother I am much impressed by her gift. Now, shall we have a glass of beer?"

When this had been accepted and drunk, Talbot called a servant to

show his guests to their rooms.

"Dinner is at nine. White tie. The chef has something special for you."

Dinner was superb. The guests and their host were magnificently handsome; the service was flawless and silent; the food and wines a gourmet's delight; crabs were tossed living into boiling water, pate from the burst livers of geese, unborn lamb, and wines whose dry sparkle remembered the agony of the pressing. Tab ate hugely, watching with sardonic amusement the cautious tasingst of his guests.

There was one moment of excitement when a venomous violin spider crawled from the heart of the black orchid Tab had pinned on Lilit's gown, but Rock flicked it from her white breast with a lightning gesture. Later, Lilit noticed a very faint cloudiness on the rim of one of Rock's wine glasses, and flashed him a warning. He refused wine from that glass. Since it had been carefully smeared with a culture of deadly anthrax germs, it was as well that he heeded her.

After dinner, the three played faro with some beautiful hand-painted Italian cards, the edges of which were razor sharp. The paint had been impregnated with a fast-acting poison, but the guests, noting that their host kept his white gloves on—it had been a very formal dinner in the old tradition—kept their gloves on also, and the game

came to a disappointingly uneventful conclusion. At midnight, Rock yawned and pushed back his chair.

"Good show, Cousin Tab, but all things must come to an end. We'll bid you goodnight." He stripped off his glove and extended his hand, on which was a ring set with a pigeon-blood ruby. The gem was huge and burned with dark fires, but the most remarkable thing about the ring was the tiny envenomed point which flashed out of a minute hole on the palm side at the pressure applied by the firm clasp of the wearer's hand with another.

Tab regarded his cousin's gesture with a faint smile. Thrusting out his own right hand, he clasped Rock's lightly, but with the same movement he caught his cousin's elbow in his own left hand and jabbed agonizingly at a nerve. Rock stood immobile, unable to close his own fingers about his cousin's hand, sweating, with a grimace of pain fixed on his lips. Assessing the situation, Lilit came to them in a perfumed rush, holding her lips up to be kissed goodnight by "Cousin Tab," who let Rock go and responded with real enthusiasm.

Lilit managed to whisper, "Could we have a little talk, later?" before she slipped out of Tab's embrace. Bowing, and smiling his fallen angel's smile, the host preceded his guests up the great stairway, cautioning them to hold on to the balustrade lest they slip on the shi-

ning treads. Tab kissed the girl's hand lingeringly as he left her at the door; he wished his cousin a pleasant goodnight, at his.

Alone, each of the visitors looked to the locks on his doors and windows. Then Lilit, remembering the ardor of Tab's goodnight, donned her laciest negligee and unlocked her door. Prudently extinguishing the lights, she draped herself on the great bed.

Rock spent a good deal of time poking in the heavy tapestry of his bed-chamber with a golf-club and sounding the walls for secret entrances. Finally, having found nothing amiss, but still dissatisfied, he decided to spend the night on a chaise lounge rather than risk the forbidding cavern of the massive tester bed.

The household settled into silence.

Although it had not been part of his plan, Talbot went to Lilit's room. As he closed the door, her husky voice bid him welcome. By name.

"How did you know it was me?" Tab's surprise made him forget his usually painfully correct grammar. "If I'd been Rockleigh—"

"I have a very keen sense of smell," Lilit whispered. "Now, shall we cut short this long-winded conversation and get to business? The nights in these latitudes are only so long."

A few minutes later it was Lilit's turn to be surprised. It was not his equipment which so startled her, but the uses he put it to. "Do you mind if I turn on the light?" she asked. "There seems to be more to this than I had anticipated."

Talbot barked a laugh. "Better not," he advised her. "I have assumed my natural shape. Seeing it might distract you from the business at hand."

Lilit sighed. Although she was far from being a normal woman, she had a normal woman's curiosity. Still, where ignorance is bliss—as the saying goes.

An hour later, Tab decided it was high time he stopped fooling around and took care of the serious work of the night. Lilit did not hear him as he left. Neither did Rockleigh hear anything when a panel at the foot of his bedroom door opened, and a hissing tangle of pit adders was decanted into the room. Soon after, several scorpions dropped from a trapdoor in the ceiling and stalked, stiff-legged and quivering, in search of something on which to vent their malevolence.

Had he remained deathly still on the chaise, Rockleigh might have lived to see the morning. However, Tab's plans were well made. A girl screamed and screamed again, frantic with fear and pain, calling Rockleigh's name. He sprang, half dazed with sleep and alarm, toward the door. Bare feet are no match for

vipers, and he actually stepped on one of the scorpions. He died in the darkness of the locked room, never knowing that his gallantry was in vain, that the voice he heard was not Lilit's. She was already dead when the screams began, pressed into a featureless pulp of bones and flesh and hair and expensive Parisian negligee, under the weight of the tons of silently-descending top of the tester bed.

The next morning Talbot Were breakfasted with good appetite in the sunny room overlooking his famous herb garden. His momentary regret at the lost beauty of the ballerina was more than offset by a suspicion that she had been a dangerously astute and determined opponent. She had saved Rockleigh's life several times, and who knew what she might have done if left unchecked? Still, he owed her some civility. He rose with a sigh and personally supervised the removal of both bodies to the crypt where the Watchet waited. He had taken them down the main stairway, for, after all, Rockleigh had been a Were and the girl his affianced wife. To hustle them down by the rear, service, stair, would be adding insult to injury.

One incident marked the proceedings. Several drops of the girl's blood dripped from the box in which the servants were transporting her to the crypt. The blood splashed on the broad treads of the

stair. Talbot had it wiped away at once. There was no harm done; in fact, the wood seemed to glow with a finer luster than before. Talbot seriously considered the virtues of fresh blood as a polishing agent before rejecting the idea as too much trouble. He was feeling a little ennuied; the zest seemed to have gone out of life. It was unlikely he would meet again a pair of opponents of a caliber equal to the pair he had just despatched. Rockleigh was the last pretender to his position; none other of the name existed. Since it required a fantastically exhausting effort for the Were-beings to spawn, and invariably resulted in the death of the male parent, it was unlikely that there would ever be another Were.

Talbot sighed and repaired to the library, where he browsed through some outre volumes until dinner time. Even the delicacies of the table failed to stimulate him; he admitted to a faint physical qualm and retired early. His sleep was disturbed. He found himself thinking of the sinuous, dark-haired ballerina with increasing respect. Stupid of him to have destroyed her so soon! She might have made an interesting companion, the more so since her aversion to himself had apparently disappeared during their final meeting. It gave him no pleasure to remember the wide, three-inch-thick pad his press had made of her. He tossed restlessly, caught

himself listening for stealthy creaks and slitherings, and finally was reduced to taking a sleeping potion.

Perhaps because of this, perhaps for more obscure reasons, he waked suddenly much earlier than usual and decided to take a brisk gallop through the morning fields to clear his head. Dressing hastily, he strode out to the head of the stairs and prepared to descend. On the safe side, of course. His foot was in the air, his balance committed irrevocably, irretrievably, to a downward motion, before he saw what was carpeting the whole broad expanse of the stair—a quivering, malevolent three-inch-thick, blood-red and bone-yellow and night-black pad, which heaved and caught hungrily at his extended foot and tightened and pulled. . . throwing him off balance at the very top of the precipitous descent. . .

The Devil had not forgiven the Weres in the matter of the Watchet. Being the entity in the best position to know that 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,' he had appeared to Lilit as she lay dying beneath the weight of the descending tester top. His terms: restoration of her shapely beauty and a position as a Special Agent, Office of Infernal Affairs, if and as soon as she could bring down Talbot, the last of the Weres.

And so she did. And every place his body hit in that smashing fall, the carpet on the stair caught him hungrily, tearing his clothes and his flesh and the very tendons and muscles from his bones.

By the time Lilit was finished with him, there wasn't enough left of Tab to make the Watchet a decent meal. ★

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READER'S COLUMN

THE EYRIE:

Dear Sirs:

It would be profane to cut up an issue of your magazine just for the subscription order. I've been an avid reader of COVEN 13 since the outset. And I must mention here, in addition to thoroughly enjoying each issues stories, I've eagerly awaited the continuance of Let There be Magick— just excellent. Best of luck and ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.

Sincerely yours— William Mitchell
Cerritos, California.

Dear Mr. Landis:

As a member of the younger generation, allow me to congratulate you on your excellent editorial in the Nov. issue of COVEN 13. Perhaps there is still hope for the older generation.

You have a magnificent magazine. Keep up the good work.

Yours,

Bill Padgett— Hayesville, N.C. P.S. How about some stories on ceremonial magick?

Dear Mr. Landis:

I have just finished the third issue of COVEN 13, and it was great. The third issue is quite a bit better than the first two issues.

"The Little People" was the best story of the magazine. I haven't read much of Howard's other work, but what I've read I've enjoyed. I hope you continue to publish stories by him.

"Let There be Magick!" is improving with each part. There are very few Swords and Sorcery stories that I like— but this is one of them.

Sincerely yours,
J. Collinson—Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.





EATS

By Sidney Harriet

Illustrated by William Stout

A warning to all those who travel lonely roads in odd seasons. Beware that flickering neon! A dinner there could well be worth your life.

The sign 'EATS' flashed on and off. Gerald Johnson parked his car. There was nothing in sight except woods, and it was raining too hard to continue.

Inside, a huge man approached him, with one hand out and the other on a large, basketball belly. "Good evening," he said. "You're just in time. I'm Harold."

"Just in time?" Gerald asked.

Harold put his arm around Gerald and escorted him into a dimly lit kitchen with a long table, upon which was a large silver pan of turkey, baked potatoes, string beans, and corn bread; all intermingled with red candles and dark green bottles of Scotch.

"Who is all this for?" Gerald

asked as a little fat woman walled into the room with a tall, skinny boy holding tight to her arm. She said: "Hello. I'm Maggie and this is Ziggy. The food's for everybody—you too. It's that time of year," she explained.

"And that's the Sheriff," Ziggy said, pointing a crooked finger at Harold.

"Sheriff?" Gerald asked.

"Well, the last one just ran off. We all needed a Sheriff, so I took the post," Harold said, smiling.

"And the loss in pay, too," Ziggy said, sitting down to the left of Gerald.

"But, that's the type of sport old Harold is," Maggie added, scratching behind her ear.

Harold led Gerald to a chair, grinned, and reached down for a napkin, which he tucked under Gerald's chin. "Now, let me get this straight," Gerald said to Harold as Maggie cut turkey and Ziggy poured him a drink. "You became Sheriff?"

"That's right," Ziggy said. "Because nobody in this town wants to fuss with Harold." He sipped at his drink and cut another slice of turkey for Gerald.

"This town, any town!" Maggie added. She munched a small wedge of corn bread. "Not one person has ever gotten tough with Harold."

"Why once I remember," Harold began, "we came here to eat and we had the food; as a matter of

fact it was last year at this time, just the same kind of food. We had some stranger in town who wanted to know why we didn't serve a salad with our dinner. Well, I didn't take any more from him. I just told him that he'd be pret-ty sorry if he kept up in that tone of voice. Well, sure enough, he kept up in that tone of voice and started the gravy going in Bernie."

"Bernie?" Gerald asked.

"Bernie Hanson," Maggie announced. "Bernie'll be here soon enough."

"Soon enough we'll *all* be here," Ziggy added cryptically.

"Bernie," Harold went on, "Looked at me and said, 'Harold?'"—he moved back from the table to make fists of his hands—" 'Sheriff? This guy's disturbing the peace.' Well, I take one look at Bernie who looks over to Oscar and Oscar looks back at me, and that's all we need. I tell the stranger his goose is cooked, *heh*, and that's the last trouble he ever gave *us*."

"But, it was swell food, even with that small roughing," Maggie said. "Everything turned out fine."

Gerald stared at a black space in Maggie's mouth, flanked by two long, pointed teeth. Then, he gulped to loosen a piece of bone stuck in his throat. He asked, repeating: "Everything turned out just fine?"

"Just fine." Harold said, putting his juice glass down. "In fact, every year, we have this food here,

and hope we have a traveller out of nowhere like you come along."

"Every year?"

"Yep! And every year since we started it's worked out all right. We set up a feast for a lonely traveller, in the spring of the year, and it brings us luck—we help him, and he helps us. Yep, it's worked out real good. Since we started the 'food,' in fact, there hasn't been any more bad luck in this whole area—crops and the like."

"And we're hoping that you'll help us keep that record for at least another year," Maggie said. She stood up and walked out of the kitchen to the front entrance. "Well, come on in!" she shouted to, as they were later introduced, Bernie Hanson, Oscar Gamak, and Marie Davies, holding her husband, Bud Davies', arm. An accompanying gust of rain brought a chill to the main room of the inn.

"Come on! Come on!" Maggie continued to yell. The iced air put shivers on Gerald's skin.

"Soup on?" Oscar Gamak asked, blowing hot breath on his hands.

"Not yet, not yet," Maggie answered loudly. "Just come on in."

"What's for dinner?" Bernie lifted a querulous eyebrow, and eager laughter broke from Bud and Marie Davies. "Anything hot?"

Ziggle grinned, and Maggie, with a note of anxiety to her voice, said "Now, you just wait and see. Just wait."

Everyone followed Maggie into the kitchen and remained standing. "Gerald?" Maggie began.

Gerald wiped his lips on his napkin and stood up.

"I want you to meet some of the finest people in this town."

"All of the people in this town," Bernie Hanson said.

"Well, glad to meet you all," Gerald began, placing his napkin on the table.

"Sit down," Maggie said, pushing Gerald back into the chair. He resumed eating and the townspeople stood in and around the corners of the room. Finally, Gerald put his fork down and called out, "Hey! Come on! Come on! Aren't you going to join in? Pull up a chair!"

Maggie placed a second helping of turkey and a baked potato on Gerald's plate. Oscar Gamak called loudly from where he leaned against three long poles placed perpendicular to the wall. "Oh, we'll eat all right, don't you worry about us."

Bud Davies folded his arms and said brightly, "You just fatten up good, stranger, and don't worry none about us."

"Well, hell," Gerald insisted, rubbing his belly with the palm of his right hand. "Have a drink at least."

"No, no," Harold said. "They'll eat soon enough, and drink, too. You don't have to worry about that."

Gerald put another slab of turkey in his mouth, hunched his

shoulders, and smiled. The townspeople kept their eyes on Gerald eating, and the rain outside continued. Maggie, looking at Gerald, smiled too, when Gerald's eyes bounced from Oscar Gamak to her. "Good food?" Maggie queried, folding her hands and rubbing the table edge. "You like it?"

Gerald swallowed and looked at the swell in Mary's stomach. He nodded and said, "You *sure* they don't want to eat? They look like a pack of wolves just standing there."

He forced a laugh and waited for the others to join in. But they did not. They just stood and stared, with the noise of the rain accentuating the momentary silence.

"Gerald!" Ziggie said finally, in sudden nervousness. "Wouldn't you like some music while you eat?"

Gerald said, "Great! Why not? You got a Hi-Fi in there, haven't you?"

"All new records, too," Ziggie said. "What do you want to hear?"

"Any dinner music?"

Ziggie stood up and skipped to the Hi-Fi, and came up with a platter by Lawrence Welk. Gerald thanked Ziggie and Maggie smiled and said, "have some more." She immediately filled Gerald's plate with thirds of everything.

"Hey, now, wait a minute," Gerald said, but Harold said quietly, "Nonsense. There ain't nothing to *wait* about."

"Go ahead, man." Bernie joined

in. "*This food's all yours.*"

Gerald frowned, but started to slice another piece of breast from the turkey. Then he said deliberately, "I don't quite know what this is all about, but I want you fine people to know that I do appreciate this."

Maggie smiled and patted Gerald's hand reassuringly. She said, "Now, now. You eat it all up."

Gerald chewed mightily, drank some scotch to wash the dry taste from his mouth, then he said, "Boy, the way I'm eating I should weigh over two hundred pounds by now."

"Around fourteen pounds more than the stranger last year," Maggie announced.

Gerald sipped more scotch and grinned superstitiously. "How much did that one weigh?"

Harold filled Gerald's glass, and said: "Oh, about one eighty-eight."

Maggie said, "Uh-unh. One eighty-six."

"Aw come on," Gerald said owlishly. "How do you *know* that for sure."

"Cause we weighed him," Ziggie said, from where he was now tending a long, rectangular box of charcoal briquets.

Gerald looked stupidly at Ziggie, who grinned back at him. Gerald returned to his plate. He put a square of butter on a piece of corn bread. "Well, nobody'll have to weigh me," he said while chewing. "I'm one ninety-eight on the button. But, after this meal," he giga-

gled, all you have to do is add five more pounds."

Maggie smiled, and Ziggy put on some more Lawrence Welk. Gerald paused from his food, put the fork down, pressed his fingers to the side of his belly, and said, "Ahh—hhh, the way you folks make me feel right at home—I'm telling you."

Maggie smiled and said, "Now, now, none of that silliness."

Gerald put another slice of turkey to his lips. Then, just as it was going into his mouth, he burped. His fork fell to the plate, his hand shot to his lips. He said, "Oh, God!" His face grew tomato red. "Excuse me!"

"Excuse you, nothing," Harold said. "Your burping, friend, is our compliment."

"Well, I really didn't mean to compliment you that way," Gerald said.

Oscar Gamak and Ziggy were sliding the box of charcoal briquets to the side of the table.

Gerald, seeing this, looked quizzically at Maggie. She said, in explanation, "Oh, just for barbecuing."

"For barbecuing?"

Gerald watched Oscar lift one of the long poles off the wall. Bernie reached for the other two; each thicker than the first, and forked at one end.

"Just for barbecuing the meat, is all," Maggie continued.

"What meat?"

Bernie stuck poles into each side

of the charcoal box.

"Oh, nonsense. Nonsense!" Maggie said quickly, pointing at the remaining turkey. "Come on," she said, "now let's eat up."

"Look, I've had enough. I'm full," Gerald said. Then he tried to stand up. But he was too full, and too close to the table—and too soaked with scotch. He couldn't rise. He chuckled foolishly, amused at his predicament. Maggie placed another serving of turkey on his plate.

"Look! I know when I'm too fed up," Gerald said. He belched loudly again. "That's when the bubbles start burping out."

Bernie roped the two upright poles to the box. Harold smiled, and filled Gerald's scotch glass while Maggie cut another slice of turkey. She said: "Here you go. Eat up, Gerald."

Gerald shook his head obstinately. "I'm pigged as it is," he explained. He rubbed his lips with his napkin. "Look, how everybody's been standing around with just me eating," he said.

He burped again. No one said anything, and Maggie placed another slice of turkey upon the uneaten remains on Gerald's plate. Harold poured another glass of scotch, and Gerald screamed—"No!"

Maggie said sternly: "Nonsense." "Maggie?"

"Now you eat it, boy!"

"Maggie, I can't."

"Sure you can."

Gerald looked at Harold, who also waved his hand, motioning Gerald to eat up. "Harold. . ."

"Nonsense," Harold said. "Sure you can."

"Harold, *please*, I know my limits, and what I ate. . ."

"No, no, no!" Harold said emphatically. He picked up a fork of turkey and put it to Gerald's lips.

"Harold!" Gerald jerked his head away, but Harold followed Gerald's mouth with the fork. "Harold!" Gerald screamed again, "I'm full!"

"Here, here," Maggie said chuckling. "We're never *completely* full."

"I really. . ." Gerald began. But when he tried to go on, Harold plunged the fork into his mouth. And Gerald munched, face reddening, eyes protruding. He was finally able to swallow. Then, he lunged for the scotch, gulped, and said, "*Now, don't you do that again!*"

But Harold put another slice of turkey to Gerald's lips.

"Maggie!" Gerald pleaded.

"Eat up, son. It's good for you, now."

"It sure is," Harold said. The fork entered Gerald's mouth. He sat motionless, his face turning tomato red.

"Eat up now," Maggie said.

Gerald shook his head, his jaws unmoving.

"Now, now. It's good for you," Harold insisted, mechanically.

But, Gerald couldn't move his jaw. His eyes began to water and his cheeks were puffed, covered with tiny bubbles of sweat.

Bernie Hanson with the help of Oscar Gamak then took Gerald's arms from the table and put them over the chair and behind his back. Gerald tried chewing the last bite of turkey, but he couldn't. Bernie folded Gerald's feet as Oscar tied his hands with rope. Then, they reversed roles and Bernie tied the feet and Oscar did the folding. Both giggled. Gerald tried rocking his body to undo his hands but his weight held him to the chair. Bernie picked up the third pole and leaned it against Gerald's back. Gerald began gagging. Maggie stood up from the table, and Harold did the same.

"Gerald, now you eat up," Maggie admonished with a robot-like, motherly insistence.

"Yes, eat up," Harold added, almost dreamily. They both started out of the kitchen. "We're tired. We'll be resting and waiting near the fire," they told the others.

Bud and Marie Davies walked over to the table and helped Bernie and Oscar lift Gerald off his feet. Gerald, choking, spit out the last chunk of turkey now caught in his throat. Seeing this, Marie Davies picked up another slice to renew the supply. But Gerald held his jaws tightly clamped against further incursion. Bernie and Oscar gently

set the pole onto the poles sticking up from the charcoal box. It held, and Gerald hung. Bernie and Mary tiptoed to the side of the room as Gerald tried wriggling away. But, the ropes were tight and the poles too secure.

"You'll never in your life get away with this!" Gerald screamed.

Then Ziggie lit a match, and the flames leapt along the full length of the box. Gerald began to scream.

Maggie walked back into the room carrying a calendar. Harold followed, his glass refilled with black juice. Bernie, Bud, and Marie all began setting napkins to their necks. Ziggie filled the wine glasses while Maggie figured aloud:

Maggie said: "All right, it's early Spring. The snow's gone and the rain's here. You all know we won't have another one for a whole year—too many tourists and travellers. Besides, we decided on only once a year anyway—in the Spring, cause it makes the corn grow."

Gerald, being rotated above the now blazing briquets, was staring in horror at his clothes, which had burst into flames. He said, "Oh, my God!" And then he screamed, "Oh, my God!"

"So he weighs 205 pounds," Harold was saying: "there are seven of

us, so that's about 30 pounds each. "He'll lose a little bit, you know."

"No!" Gerald screamed—"Please, no!"

"So, we'll do like always. We'll—"

"I think we outta take turns for the prime pieces," Ziggie said. "We pull those damn strips out of your hat, Harold, and you and Maggie always win. . ."

"You ain't questioning me, are you, boy?" Harold said menacingly—and Gerald's screams diminished to a moaning "Oh, oh, oh. . ."

"No, Harold," Ziggie said in alarm. "I just thought that. . ."

"Well, *don't think!*" Harold said.

Maggie said, "Here's the hat. The slips are all made out for his parts. Now, who wants to be first?"

Oscar moved up to the hat and deliberated on the folded paper slips with his hand to his chin.

Outside, the rain was falling in tempestuous swirls; the sound of it a veritable crescendo upon the tiled roof of the inn. The neon sign 'EATS' had long since been disconnected. Inside, as each participant stepped up to deliberate cautiously before the hat with the paper slips, all was quiet—except for a now consistently sharp crackling and popping along the length of the oblong box of flaming charcoal. ★

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let there be Magick!



CONCLUSION: SYNOPSIS

By James R. Keaveny

Kyrie Fern, Terran graduate of the Galactic Foundation for controlled Environmental Development of Plus-10 Sentients is sent as an Adjuster to the planet FLEGIS-CAMELOT, of the Fomalhaut system. Trouble is brewing. Moving into battle is the extra-galactic FORCE of the Kaleen who backs warriors of the southern hemisphere, as opposed to a group of cuddly little animals called Pug-Boos, who are out to save the Northern feudal kingdoms. Kyrie Fern, in the guise of The Collin, a folk-hero returned to life, rescues Marack's princess from Omnian forces, involves himself in intrigue to further the cause of Marack, and accompanies the Princess, Murie Nigaard, to the protection of a 'White Wizard' in Marack's Snow-Mountains. He finds that this Wizard has been killed by warriors of Om who have arrived at the Keep aboard a great flying lizard called a Vuun. In desperate battle Kyrie defeats the enemy, but succumbs to the maguck of the Kaleen in turn, and loses Murie. He and his men are then saved by the unobtrusive administrations of a Pug-Boo named Pawbi. . . .

It took but seconds for release by the Pug-Boo, Pawbi, from the sorcery of the Kaleen of Om. The accompanying memory lapse was negligible; the therapy, excellent. It was as if we had awakened from a long sleep, refreshed, rested—and famished.

We arose, the five of us, from the bloodied flagstones to stare

curiously—almost in awe—at each other. For we *knew* what we had accomplished. There was a bond between us now such as few men living anywhere would ever have. We grasped hands and silently gave each other the arm-to-shoulder simile of the Terran *abrazo*. Words were useless. They would come later. The smell of blood, despite the

cold, lay heavy, still, upon our nostrils.

Then we whistled the wide-eyed dottles to us; noting that they were somewhat skittish in that they had thought us dead. We retrieved our saddlebags and furred cloaks. Henery trembled when I touched him and he would not meet my eyes. Dottles most definitely possessed a higher intelligence quotient than most animals. But, though they also had the standard *destrier's* modicum of courage, to face a great Vuun—or the carnage all around us—was something else again.

I gave Henery a friendly pat on the rump to help assuage his guilt. Then he trotted off with the others to the warmth, food and protection of the great stables. The muscular Tober offered himself as dottle-warden. He held them in the courtyard until he had opened the gates, lifted the portcullis and dropped the bridge so that the remainder of our herd who had been locked outside could join them.

In the great hall we found tables laid for a feast. And, indeed, such would have been the case had we simply surrendered our throats to the fal-dirk and allowed the Princess to be taken without a struggle. Our coming had caught them at the very moment of sup, for the table groaned with still-warm tureens of gog-stew, vegetables, bread and swiss.

We staggered then to the great room of the Chirurgeons, masseurs, and gnostics—and found what we had hoped for; baths with heated water from great ceramic cisterns. We soaked, bathed and tended each others wounds. Mine were a shallow gash across right forearm and shoulder, (our armor was slashed, torn, and otherwise in sad shape) and a deep sword thrust through the thigh muscles of my left leg. It was just now beginning to stiffen. The soaking, the mutual massaging, and the salves and ungeants—plus, I am convinced, some of the Pug-Boo's juggling about with our cell structure and blood chemistry—did wonders for all of us. Tober (tending the dottles) and Hargis, like myself, had but flesh wounds. Not so Charney and Griswall. Besides bleeding from a dozen gashes each, they had sustained a number of dangerous sword thrusts: Charney, through chest and body; Griswall, a deep thrust to mid-rift, and an axe bite to sever the shoulder muscles of his left arm. . . . We were dextrous, indeed with gut and needle. No seamstress, I thought, had ever sewn a neater line than I in putting Griswall back together; this after all cuts had been cleansed, treated and salved. Neither of the two complained of internal bleeding—only of a soreness and a stiffness, which was to be expected. And, again, I thought: This was the Pug-Boo's doing. Since, if it were not—in my lexicon—both of

them would be well on the way to being dead by now.

The proof of the pudding here, I think, was that after these most attentive and thorough ablutions we went to the hall where we, the victors did silently—and most deliberately—sit down at one of the tables and eat our fill.

There were three draped and fur-strewn chairs at the center table: the other two were at right angles along the walls with ourselves occupying chairs at the southernmost. No doubt, I thought, those were the seats of the Prince of Kelb and his favorites. Pawbi, the Pug-Boo, now lay on his back in the center chair. His little round feet were draped over one arm, his head against the other, and his little raccoon-teddy-bear arms were folded across his fur-dimpled belly. He was sound asleep—or so it seemed.

Tober joined us; made a point of brushing snow from his surcoat and armor so that we would know that a storm was now raging without. He went to the baths and returned quickly to where we continued to eat in silence. I had the strong sensation as the still warm stew entered my belly, of being instantly recharged with energy. It was as if my stomach and sundry auxiliary organs seized upon the food, and through some miracle of the digestive system, changed it to 'instant blood.

After that we retired to the fire-

blazing warmth of an ante-room, replete with fur-blanketed couches. We built up the fire with dottle-briquets and then, without further ado, and regardless of the fact that the fires might die so that the cold of the raging storm without would penetrate each nook and cranny of our retreat, we slept.

I awoke a number of hours later. I knew this for the simple reason that though it was still dark beyond the heavily draped windows, the fire had been replenished more than once. The stack of dottle-briquets had dwindled considerably. I was possessed then of a fantastic euphoria of well-being. The fire, my relaxed state, the added warmth of the sleeping furs; the knowledge that we had survived and that our myriad wounds were as pin-pricks in the rapidity of their healing, all served to enhance this feeling. Then I thought of Murie and what I must do, though indeed, my thoughts had never left her. I had made no idle promise. I still had a 'life-boat' from the Deneb-3 placed just a short distance from Glagmaron; *damped* from temporal space, to be sure; but available to my needs. I had but to say the numbers aloud—Ah, hah! the numbers—the words—the words! Hey! and Hey! again. . . Sleep had indeed cleared my brain! I had, perforce, found Camelot's *Rosetta Stone*, and more, perhaps. And now, in effect, and for sure, Kelb, Vuunland,

the Kaleen, himself—whoever, in fact, held the Princess Murie Nigaard and the Lady, Caroween in thrall, would have a visitor and soon.

My newfound knowledge spurred me to instant action. I sat up on my couch, thrust out my sword-pierced thigh to find it not as stiff as I had thought, and stood up. I tested the leg. Good! There would be no problem there. The sleeping couches of my companions, illuminated by fire-light only, for we had doused our candles and oil lamps, were still occupied.

We had changed to fresh warm clothing after bathing and dressing our wounds, so that I was fully dressed now. I reached for my cloak; drew it tight around me; attached sword and scabbard to belt and silently left my companions to continued, healing sleep.

In the great hall and in the center chair at the great table, Pawbi, the Pug-Boo was now wide awake. I marched directly forward to confront him across the boards.

I said deliberately: "I would visit the rooms of Goolbie, the Great Sorcerer. I would see the place where he died."

Pawbi merely stared at me.

"No more games," I said bluntly. "I would visit Goolbie now!"

Then Pawbi leapt, honey-bear-like, to the flagstones and rushes; where he remained on all fours, though I knew he could just as eas-

ily walk erect. For minutes he darted this way and that, seemingly going in no direction at all; as a puppy would, or a kitten with a plaything. He even stopped once to worry a white and shining gog-bone, staring stupidly at me over its knobbed protuberances. I simply waited.

Then he left the hall and I followed. We went by a narrow passage directly to the south tower where we climbed a spiral stone stair without handrails to the very top of its one hundred foot height.

The room we entered was small, round, and with two windows, open now to the chill of black night and white storm. The room, or study, encompassed a sleeping couch with furs, a desk, a chair, a table and sundry shelves with all the paraphernalia of the warlock, the sorcerer, and the alchemist. The remaining shelves around the interior of the walls were lined with books.

And there was Goolbie!

He lay where he had fallen, beneath the eerie dark south window. His corpse was blackened, twisted. He looked as if he had been hit with 100,000 volts. The room still stank of ozone.

I wasted no time for I had none to waste—and Goolbie helped. The information I sought was a part of Goolbie's treasure; the last thing he had touched before being blasted by the Kaleen—his Great Book; his findings, his conclusions and his summations.

It lay now upon the table, opened to the very pages of his last entry. I risked laser heat from my belt to light two oil lamps, and to get a fire going. There was no time for tedious flint and steel and shavings. I did this in Pawbi's presence, for, I thought, it really no longer mattered. He had seated himself upon Goolbie's sleeping couch and his eyes had slitted—he dozed.

I pulled my cloak around me and settled to the contents of Goolbie's book.

He had given it a title—something like: *"A historee and a encyclopedia of the Flegisian world and the inhabitants thereof; and the Two Lands and the Great Water, and all that otherwise therein do dwell and do have converse and effect one to the other—plus the Gods and the things of magick and from where it do come—"*

Goolbie was, without a doubt, Camelot-Flegis's first librarian; first true encyclopedist; and first true 'webster' since, unlike the few Flegisian notes or signs I had read to date, his spelling had some consistency.

He had studiously divided his great book into what he presumed were pertinent and specific sections; and had sub-divided the sections into points of information in 'alphabetical' order. Each section of a section remained incomplete, however, so that I assumed that he was still adding to everything.

I spent the remaining time between black night and pearling dawn studying Goolbie's Work. I journeyed again, through Goolbie's eyes and thoughts, to Gheese, Ferlach; the Seligs of the River-Sea, the great jungles; and beyond those far darklands—to the world of Om. The two great continents north and south, which spiraled around the water world of Flegis-Camelot, were land masses to be considered with. Marack and the countries to the north ranged three thousand miles from snow-cap to the tropics of the River-Sea. The sea—or section of the total ocean dividing the two continents—was another three hundred to five hundred miles in width, with a myriad of islands dotting its expanse. Then came the two lands on the southern continent's northern shores, Seligal and Kerch; each a thousand miles in length and breadth. They were mostly jungle. And further yet to the savannahs and the heavily forested mountains, moorland and tundra of the great area of the darklands, the land of Om. . . From the River-Sea to the southern pole another three thousand miles could be counted.

The history of Camelot was the history of its wars and of its trading ships—and most of this but recent; in the last two thousand years. Like most worlds of plus ten sentients, it was most difficult to separate myth from fact and Goolbie's de-

piction of things was a most wonderful admixture of both. Had Om always been the center of all evil? No. Only perhaps in every other century—long enough to maintain a certain continuity of stasis in which a singularly low, barbaric level of developement had been achieved, *maintained*, as it were, and controlled. Men of the north had been to Om; those of Om had sailed to the north. The River-Sea, itself, precluded, at least in the past, any truly large scale war. Cities dotted the lands of Om, Seligal and Kerch, just as they dotted Ferlach, Kelb and Gheese, and the Island Empire of the Seligs. Almost all at one time or other had been raided by war parties, fleets and armies; so that essentially all knew of each other as either the looter or the looted. Only Marack and the lands to the north, however, had shown the first faint signs of the socio-economic evolutionary process, the Collegiums, the rising tradesmen and guildsmen. Beyond the River-Sea there was none of this. And each time the possibilities had arisen—sundry philosophers creating schools of discourse; artisans going beyond the accepted craftwork: daring to invent, explore—to *research*, they had been destroyed. The god Ormon was but one of many in Seligal, Kerch and Om. And in Om proper there ruled the living god, the Kaleen, seen by no one; administered to only by his priesthood and the

subordinates of his governing class—themselves kings, princelings and petty lords. . . The Kaleen ruled from the dark lands; so named, according to Goolbie, because of the black earth, moors, fens and mists of its great rolling hills and deep valleys. The Kaleen ruled in Hish, city of silence, city of priests, of warriors, of slaves; wherein all that was planned for Om *and Flegis* was brought to fruition, and where the thought of the Kaleen prevailed above all else.

Despite Goolbie's reference to the 'cities' of the world of Flegis, imparting to the gentle reader a gaudy picture of a great and metropolitan world, such was not the case. I knew this better than he for I had seen the greater part of it. Flegis-Camelot was to me what it really was. . . A water world of two great continents; each with but a few millions of humanoids at best, and each a generally savage, unexplored and primitive world of endless forests, mountains, and dark rivers. The 'great cities' of Goolbie's 'Great Book', were, like Glagmaron of Marack, populated at the most with fifty thousand people. And, if there were a dozen of these, inclusive of Hish in Om and Reen in Ferlach, all else were towns and villages—and most of these were seacoast and river-mouth habitations, dependent upon trade and a minimum of agriculture in the hinterland.

The Kaleen controlled all below the River-Sea through Omnian warriors and the elite soldiery of the Yorns; through the dead-alives and the priesthood, and through a black pall of death-dealing 'magick'; which I now knew was but the adroit manipulation of the Planet's magnetic field.

And how did Goolbie handle the fact of Flegisian magick—Omnian or Marackian? "It is a thinge," he wrote "of sounde. For if one do not saye the wordes aloud the effect of the witchery is not sooth, and twill come to nought."

He had truly hit upon the 'secret'. For, as I myself now knew, other than the admixture of simple chemistry to the 'wordes' and their proper pronunciation, Camelot-Flegis' magick was just so much mish-mash. That it existed at all was because of its singular role in plans formulated across the ages—across an eon of time by forces—and in this case, *forces*, and not just *a* force, who were active *now! Right now!* The Kaleen was but a part of this. Who and what was the other? The answer, in part, was obviously, Pug-Boos. But could one really trust the obvious? Could not that other power be simply using Pug-Boos as the medium whereby its will or plan or counter-plan was put to action? After all what, really, was a Pug-Boo? I looked up to check the sleeping figure of Pawbi, that fat, furry, daintily snoring 'rodent' as

he had been called by the possessed Prince of Kelb. He continued snoring but in my mind's eye I remembered him walking toward us in all that horror of the courtyard, and the feeling of goodness and protection that accompanied his approach when all, indeed, seemed lost.

I remembered too the voice of Hooli, soothing, assuaging. . . Why Hooli? Had the voice been Pawbi's? Was Pawbi, Hooli? But I had forgotten—the voice was my voice. Were there any other Pug-Boos but those we knew to exist? There, too, was an interesting possibility. Were they all one entity? a collective? It was obvious that they knew of the Kaleen and, in their way, opposed him. Did the Kaleen know of the Pug-Boos? I was willing to bet, remembering the Prince of Kelb's statement to the effect that Pug-Boos were rodents, that the Kaleen did not. So then, in the midst of a world where magick, created by the Kaleen, worked as a series of events operative when the proper sounds were emitted, so that whole fields of force; matrices of energy were rearranged in finest detail, water became wine, sviss became gog-milk, force-fields protected kings from harm, material and living things were atomized and recreated according to their structures or the structure demanded, the transmutation of metals was a fact, the dead were activated; love potions in the form of hyper-activated genitalia

were real; storms were childish games; death incidental. In all this, the equally (?) powerful Pug-Boos remained hidden.

Why then had not the Kaleen prevailed *completely* over these many centuries? I thought, after a period of pondering, that I had the answer to that too, but I wasn't quite sure. I had learned a lot, though. Enough to know where I must go, what I must do, and how, generally, I was to do it. I woke Pawbi; took his paw in mine. Together we descended the winding stairs of the great tower and made our way through the deserted hall to the others.

Outside was a white hell of howling wind and snow. And in the midst of this we buried our dead with honor. And we erected a great stone, a cromlech for heroes above their mass grave. The Yorns and men of Kelb were left for another time. They would keep well in that natural refrigerator of a courtyard.

Then Tober released our herd and we provided ourselves with food-stuff for our journey, forage for the dottles, and all else needed for the trip that lay ahead. Pawbi rode with me, seated behind me on fat Hene-ry's rump.

The ride was nightmare. If we had averaged 20 miles per hour to Goolbie's Keep from Glagmaron, we did better than half again that speed on the return trip. The dottles literally flew through the storm

pausing only to shake the ice of the Keep, with all its horror, from their paws. The road across the white wastes and down the precipitous stone hewn paths of the mountains was a veritable maelstrom, a madly flowing stream of dottles. We did in one day that which had taken us two days, in that at the end of our first day we were once again beside the stream where I had discoursed upon the pros and cons of the dead-alives I had re-slain.

And it was the sixth hour Greenwich, and I was as ready as I would ever be. I had sought the excuse of needed privacy, and it was granted me by the others, who, I suspect, had long concluded that I was truly something other than a man of Camelot-Flégis. . .

I moved out from the fires some three-hundred yards to a series of upright stones and seated myself upon one of them. The time was right. I would make contact in exactly two minutes. No more. I, myself, had so arranged it. Not that we would be reduced to but two minutes message-wise. They would have taped what there was to tape — I likewise. This information would be fed instantaneously back and forth to be read or heard at a later moment. The two minutes were for us. At the proper moment I checked my ring chronometer. The count-down now was thirty seconds. I pressed my belt stud and waited. . .

"In!" It was Kilroy's voice, flat, curt, and mechanical.

"In," I said, resigned to proper formula. "*Question.* Are there Pug-Boos anywhere else on Camelot-Flegis?"

"Certainly! The woods are full of them in Yorn territory. They live in family groups, spend most of their lives in select trees, and are about grade 'o' on the I.Q. chart. *Question.* Can you be prepared to leave, space-boatwise, at emergency signal?"

"No. I'm here for the duration. *Question.* Is the planetary mag field broken in the proximity of Hish?"

"Yes! *Question.* Is your presence known in your true capacity by the baddies?"

"No! *Question.* Can you release me from penalty of use of equipment?"

"No! And you damn-well know why!"

"*Question.* Have you included coordinates for Vuun territory in the tapes?"

"Yes! Time's up — contact in 72 hours, Greenwich. Fade now!"

"Fade now," I said.

And that was that. I had brought a small skin of sviss with me. I put it to my lips and downed a full third of it. Then I relaxed on the stone to hear the message.

The receiver was the belt; the circuit attuned to the node at the base of my skull. I activated the circuit. The message began:

"Aboard the DENE3-3 — Fomal-

haut I, 5 Parsecs from Foundation Center: We came into the atmosphere of Fomalhaut II's third planet (we will call it Alpha) counterposed to its axial spin; this, within 200 miles of surface so that 'atmospherically' there was but little resistance to temporal mass. A planned circumnavigation was made within the two minute span; all systems open. The following information is hereby listed for general application to existing problems, excluding the normal, standard trivia . . .

"As previously noted, the planet is bereft of life, with the effects of a nuclear holocaust most evident. What had not been noted until now is that the planet is also completely *sterile*. No single amoeba, spore, bacilli, in any form, exists. *All* life is dead. Previous life is evidenced in that the shells of great cities and other marks of a humanoid civilization abound throughout the length and breadth of the planet — metal bridges, canals, great roads. The marks of forests, too, remain; though, as stated, no life now exists in any form. The planet is an absolute anachronism in that it has an atmosphere and land and great oceans, but still no life. It is also extra-galactic in that *it has no magnetic field*.

(Jackpot on that one, I thought, and I continued to listen.)

"Since there is no magnetic field, Fomalhaut's 'Alpha' can be said — in terms of temporal space — *to be non-existent*, or, to put it different-

ly, to exist simultaneously in hyper and temporal space. Fomalhaut's 'Alpha' can therefore be likened as a window, a way station, a bridge from somewhere else to here — this galactic island. Whatever the reasons, the facts of planetary destruction, the absence of all life and a consequent and total sterility, must play some vital role.

"An instant conclusion is that extra-universal, *alien* contact may have been made; may even now be working through this 'way station,' and further, that, according to information from you, Camelot-Flegis may even now be involved. You are therefore directed by the Foundation to proceed with all caution, and that under *no* circumstances are the life-forms of Camelot, in opposition or otherwise, to be aware of your existence. Until knowledge is definitive in-re the question of 'Alpha' and/or of the tie-in with Camelot-Flegis, this directive is final . . .

"Latest data on the movement of Omnian forces is that a fleet of some 3,000 ships; all that have been mustered in the port cities of the countries of Seligal and Kerch, have embarked for Kelb and Great Ortmund. They should arrive in those lands within two days. It is estimated that some 200,000 troops and 20,000 cavalry comprise these contingents. Few dottles were seen boarding ships though at least 20,000 cavalymen rode into the port cities — it is estimated therefore that these riders would receive their

mounts from dottles already in the subverted countries of Kelb and Great Ortmund."

The message then continued and ended with a lot of trivia — interesting, but most of it already known to me.

I withdrew to the campfire and my stalwarts and Pawbi. We didn't post a guard. Somehow I knew that with Pawbi around we had some small degree of protection — and this despite the fact that Hooli had been with the Princess when she was spirited away by the Lady Elioseen. If the Kaleen had a mind to check us out, I was sure that he would be met with just enough interference to come a cropper; he would then chalk it up to simple natural causes and switch his attention elsewhere. This does not mean that Pawbi would step in if the Kaleen's interest was sufficient for a *complete* effort. Uh-unh. The way I had it psyched, the Pug-Boos, for whatever their reasons, would interfere only to the extent that their efforts would not be known. Their interference would then be attributed to a flaw in the Kaleen's own machinery; a miscalculation, an unforeseen error — whatever. Example: it was quite true that the Kaleen's 'Magick' at Goolbie's Keep was sufficiently strong to encompass all who fell within its focal aura. We have noted already the slow movements of the Prince and his cohorts in carrying Murie and Caroween to the Vuun.

It was absolutely *not* sufficient, however, to prevent the Prince's men from killing us. That's where Pawbi played his game. He simply added to the Kaleen's own strength so that those who would have killed us were powerless to do so. He did this in such a way that no outside force would be suspected. That was the game the Pug-Boos played: to influence! To control! To direct! But *not* at the expense of exposure. They worked, and would continue to work, in such a way that their presence would remain hidden, until such time as — well! That was the question. And it remained exactly that. *Who* and *what* was the force of the 'Kaleen?' *Who* and *what* were Pug-Boos? Was I really, by siding with Marack and the countries of the north, on the side of the 'angels?' I continued to think so. So much so that I knew in my heart as we pounded the last few miles toward Glagmaron on the following day that I would not heed the directive of the Foundation *to proceed with all caution.*

I had concluded that *I* knew better than *they* what the developing 'something' was. And that I, better than they, could best thwart, or otherwise provide the quite necessary 'fly-in-the ointment.'

We rode into Glagmaron City at dusk, or rather we rode around it, taking the granite road above the Cyr to the Castle. I wanted above all else to avoid a meeting with

Lord Fon-Tweel.

"An additional caution, Sirs," I told Griswall and the others as we approached the castle drawbridge. "We must see that our rooms are next each other, for it may be that with the Lord Fon-Tweel in charge of Glagmaron, we must needs battle our way from this courtyard too."

Griswall rode ahead of our small group to talk with the commander of the gate. All of the Palace Guard, now skeleton remnants, were friends of Griswall. The Lord Fon-Tweel, Griswall was told, was camped on the great plain to the east of the city with his 30,000 men. The roster had been completed yesterday.

But Fon-Tweel had yet to prepare for the ride south to Gheese and Ferlach. Griswall cautioned the commander and his cohorts, in the king's name, to make no mention of our presence. And, since he was their senior and he was also so well liked, they promised to do this . . .

I had dared the castle for one simple reason: This night there would be three Pug-Boos together: Hooli, Jindil, and Pawbi. *I meant to have converse with the three of them.*

We took Rawl's now-vacant apartment, and another next to that. Charney and Hargis stayed with me. Tober stayed with Griswall. We dined in an adjunct to the Great Hall; were massaged and bathed in the room of the surgeons, and then retired to our beds for much

needed sleep — or so my men thought.

But it was not to be that way. "Sirs and friends," I told them in the hallway outside our rooms, "these last days have seen us sworn to the King, to the Princess, and to Marack. From now on, *and to the end*, this will be totally so. "Be ready, then," I admonished them, "to ride this very night. For I promise you that such things will happen soon, that if you live your deeds will be saga and song throughout the ages in every hearth and hall of our north countries. Sleep now and I will wake you."

"And when, my lord?" Griswall asked gruffly.

"I do not know as yet," I answered.

"And will *you* sleep, Sir Collin?" Charney asked, concerned.

I smiled. "I mean to do that," I said.

We clasped hands and entered our rooms. Charney and Hargis took the great bed and were almost instantly asleep. I chose a fur-covered couch which pulled close to the stone-laced windows, and laid me down and closed my eyes.

But not to sleep. To relax, yes! To prepare myself for a contact that I could only hope would come.

And it did. And the doors were finally opened to that which had been hidden. So that in the end I knew that if my message to my stalwarts had suggested song and saga whether they lived or died; so now I

knew this to be true. Above all else *it would be true*.

We had doused the candles, and the largest of the two moons, free now of the rain-filled clouds which had fled to the far horizons, peered curiously in at me. I stared back, unwinking, until my eyes grew tired. Relax. Relax, I told myself, breathing deeply of the scented night air. Relax, and let that which will be, be. . . Time passed and I felt a slow goodness then throughout my body. It was as if each muscle were suspended, individually, free of tension, nonexistent, every bit of me free, so that my mind no longer had a body — so that my mind too was free.

I closed my eyes.

And Hooli came, and Pawbi and Jindil, and their voices were as one voice, and that voice, as before, was my own. . .

"Collin!" the voice said. "Collin! It is the time now for you and for us. And you were correct to think we would come to you. A page has been turned, Collin, and a step has been taken. It matters not if the step was ours or *theirs* — it is irrevocable."

"At what point are we, then?" I asked, my question implying a knowledge I did not possess. Beyond the blackness of my closed eyes I could see them sitting in mid-air, out beyond the lace of stone; three pairs of legs flat out, pudgy paws over pudgy tummies . . . Their shoe-button eyes seemed to gleam in uni-

son and three pink tongues made a circular swipe around the blunted laughter of three brown and grinning muzzles.

"Your question has no answer, Collin," my voice echoed back to me. "Since you know neither the beginning nor the end — or even the *now* of it all. You are here for a single purpose. And the time for that has come."

"Oh?" I said. "And who are you to say this?"

"We sent for you, Buby."

"Did you now? Really. Just how did you do that?"

"Through your *Watcher*, my dear."

"The soothsayer and the crystal ball at Klimpinge?"

"Yes!"

I sighed. "But when first you appeared — when I was a prisoner in Castle Gortfin — you asked me where I came from; who I was . . ."

"We would know if you knew or suspected *us*."

I sighed again. "But *me*. How did you know you would get me?"

"We didn't. Whoever! It would have made no difference, it makes none now."

"I see," I said slowly — though I didn't, really. "But the *variables* — Myself — the Princess — How could you know? What if I had been killed at Gortfin, in the tournament, at Goolbie's Keep?"

"The chances were that you would not; as for the Keep we tried to warn you."

"The chances that I would have been killed at the Keep — even they were slim?"

"Yes."

"That's hard to believe," I said bluntly — "but if I had been?"

"There are always alternatives."

"Another page?" I asked sarcastically.

"Something like that."

"And perhaps another thousand years?"

"That too is possible."

"Great Gods!" I exclaimed in irony. And then, "I know of you. I suspected, and now I know that there are other Pug-Boos on Camelot-Flegis."

Hooli and Jindil and Pawbi just smiled.

"*All right!*" I said. "Then tell me what I am to do, since you've arranged it all. *I* will then decide whether to do it. But first check me to see if I've psyched you properly. To begin with, you are not of Flegis and you have taken the form of Pug-Boos for the simple reason that they alone, on all Camelot, are a most harmless and lovable type mammal. You do this to conceal your presence from the 'force' of the Kaleen — and to, simultaneously, gain entry to the presence of the kings and lords of the northlands as harmless pets. This gives you entry to their council, to their thinking, and to all that will transpire by their hands. All this you use against the Kaleen."

The Pug-Boos smiled.

"Except," I continued, "that you act as the people's minstrels, too. And you play music of a kind that tells them of their past — *the past of Fomalhaut's Alpha*. Therefore they know and love you, and accept you as something other than simple Pug-Boos. They know you as the possessors of all their history."

"Not true," the Pug-Boos smiled. "They have a hint of music, nothing else. Have you ever been told by anyone of the history which *you* read into the music? It exists solely in their subconscious. We do but serve to keep it there so that genetically, it will be as an ingrained memory pattern, to be used — some day."

"But do you not risk discovery by the Kaleen in the playing of this music?"

"No. For the listeners are shielded at the time of the playing and there is nought left in their conscious minds come morning. Even now all those of Kelb and Great Ortmund have no memories of a Pug-Boos song."

I tried another tack: "I would know," I asked, "if the Kaleen, too, is an animal or humanoid of Camelot-Flegis, possessed by an alien, force similar, but in opposition to, your own."

"The Kaleen is a force unto itself. It is but the fragmented part of a whole . . . and acts for that whole."

"And are you — but the fragmented part of a whole, so that you too act for it in the guise of

gentle Pug-Boos?"

There was a short period of silence in which the Pug-Boos eyed me solemnly. Then the voice came strongly: "Have done, Sir Collin. You shall be told so that you will know in part all that you need to know. Though we are of a common Galaxy, ours is a life form older by millennia than all that you know. We knew and know of the force called 'The Kaleen' on Camelot-Flegis. It is a force beyond your power to comprehend; beyond, in part, even ours. It is extra-galactic; of another universe, whose gateway is the planet, 'Alpha,' of Fomalhaut II. Beyond that gateway, in that other universe, a battle has raged for uncounted millennia. The 'force' is but one of the antagonists; of its opponent we know nothing. Suffice it to say that the '*force*' sought an escape, a way necessary to avoid final destruction. The unthinkable energies of an entire galaxy were directed to the single purpose of creating a warp through hyperspace; to seize upon a single planet in a single system, and to substitute itself for the life form of that planet, and so escape the holocaust that pursued it.

"Alpha, the planet of Fomalhaut was chosen. The space warp was created. So too, was the life form of 'Alpha' selected for transmigration . . . But we, born of this galaxy, came to know of the warp, and our powers were such that we transferred all that was sentient

life to Flegis 3, and destroyed by sterility all that remained on Alpha. And thus, though the gateway remained, its potential for exploitation was in part destroyed. We say in part, for the simple reason that in the transfer a single element of the 'force,' dormant in the body of a sleeper, was also transferred. And it is here on Camelot; weak, without the strength to recross the miles of intervening space to the gateway; with strength only to stay alive, to maintain contact, and to prepare for that day when a 'path' from Camelot to Alpha of Fomalhaut II is created so that the potential of 'Gateway' is again available. Then will the life of Camelot-Flegis — survivor of Alpha — be utilized again as the 'force' had intended in the beginning."

"But how were they *not* aware of *your* interference, your creation of a sterile planet; your denial, as it were, of a base of operations to them?"

"Simultaneously with their invasion — for this took place across the space of a hundred years — nuclear war broke out between opposing factions on Alpha — along with the first attempts at space travel. The resultant holocaust, though falling short of planetary destruction, presented an excuse for that destruction which was acceptable . . . As stated, Alpha's people (the remnants) were transported to Camelot in the handful of ships that existed — we destroyed their memories

so they would not again in tens of centuries cross space to Alpha — and once again unleash the whirlwind . . . *We then sterilized the planet.* This, in the absence of a magnetic field, destroyed by the 'force' in the creation of their space warp, was a simple thing to do."

"And it, the 'force,' was still not aware of your interference?"

"All was attributed, seemingly, to the warp, and to the nuclear holocaust. From that, they supposed, came the sterility."

"In Hooli's music there was a hint of galactic destruction beyond that of just the single planet of Fomalhaut II."

"This was a suggestion of the struggle in terms of that other universe, and a suggestion of what well may happen here if the 'force' in the long run were to prevail."

"Sounds pretty pat."

"It is pat."

"All right," I said. "Here comes the big question: Why have you not just destroyed this gateway and the force yourselves? You seemingly have the power . . ."

"That is a question, Sir Collin, that we are not prepared to answer. Think what you will — that we are weak; that we have other games to play. We say only this: that our goal is a Camelot free of the 'force,' the Alpha planet of Fomalhaut II to once more be fertile, to have a proper field; and the gateway to be closed until such time as controls can be instituted over such contact

with that alien universe as to guarantee absolute safety to ours . . ."

"There is a lot unanswered."

"And so it will remain."

"You know then, completely, of the Galactic Foundation."

"We do."

"What if the Foundation, itself, isolates Alpha for total destruction as a precautionary means?"

"We would prevent them. But they will not see the need for that. For in this respect you cannot tell them what we have told you."

"I already have; an instantaneous tape at my last message period."

The Pug-Boos smiles were wider still and their auras halo-like. "There was no message. Your tape was blank."

"You bastards," I said. I shook my head.

"And too, young Collin. What you now know of us you can impart to no one, ever. Such an effort, in your idiom, would 'boggle your mind' to a state of instantaneous mental paralysis. We caution you not to try it."

I thought about that and all I could say after a while was, again: "You bastards." Then finally I, sighed and said.: "All right! You sent for me. I have been subjected to a thousand bits of nonsense. Let's have done with it. What's the *dénouement*? What is this simple job that I am to do that you cannot do?"

"There is nothing that we *cannot* do. We prefer, however, that you do

it."

"What a charade," I said. "Six years with the Foundation. The rank of *Adjuster*, and I am reduced to the status of pawn on a chess-board . . ."

"But," said Hooli — and I knew it was he, for he leaned toward me and winked in the saying — "The pawn has already taken the Princess, who will someday be queen. Is not that single thing worth all the rest to you?"

"You sure know how to touch the right button," I said. "Yes! It damn-well is worth all the rest to me. Now speak! What would you with me?"

"Exactly what you had intended all along. Rescue the Princess. You will return to your small ship and thence to the mountains of Ilt. The Vuun has most wisely, after returning the Prince Keilweir to Kelb, kept your Princess and her companion as hostage in *their* game with Om. Effect your rescue of the Princess, then, while there, you will dissuade the Vuuns from participation in the coming battle. This will be an unexpected ploy against the Kaleen, since he, it, or whatever, counts heavily on their support."

"And how does one explain my ability to fly through the air?"

"It will not be explained. Upon your persuasion of the Vuuns to defect — *they, themselves will return the Princess to her father*. All memory of your part in this will then vanish from the Princess' mind. You

have that power."

"You are just the greatest," I sighed.

"We think so, too," Hooli said.

"And all of this is to happen, just like that."

"If you don't blow the ball-game, Buby."

"Sheee!"

They began to fade and I shouted after them, mentally, "Thanks, you bastards. Thanks at least for the healed wounds. Maybe that's what you really are: a bunch of small-planed pharmacists. . ."

"No trouble," Hooli's voice came faintly. "It's no trouble at all."

The relaxation came again. An hour of it, two hours. Every fibre of my body—as in those few brief moments on the flagstones of Goolbie's Keep—was washed with a 'goodness' of peace, a re-building of tired and weary cells, a replenishing of bright red blood. . . I let it happen.

Then I arose and awoke Charney and Hargis, who awakened Griswall and Tober in turn. And we dressed, attending to each others armor. Fresh surcoats, underdress and padded long shirts, buckled swords and fal-dirks. We made our way through the dark halls to the yard and to the men-at-arms of the gate-warden.

I asked for but ten dottles, including Henery. And all were surprised at this, for they did not know what I knew. Then we rode out across the bridge and into the silvery night. And the gate-keepers were

surprised at that, for they still feared dead-alives.

The path took us down from the field before Glagmaron Castle and on to the 'great south road.' As we came off the castle hill we could see to our north-east, spread before the walls of Glagmaron City, the rows of tents and 'dottle rings' of the gathered army of the Lord, Fon-Tweel. Fires blazed and the great field was an acreage sown with flaming embers.

My men asked no questions, and I told them nothing. That is the way it would be. We had but twenty miles to travel. We reached the area of the star-ship in exactly one hour, and I led them off the road and up the bluff to where but a short ten days ago I had awaited the coming of the Princess Murie Nigaard and entourage. At the top, in a small hollow at the base of a stand of trees, I asked them to unsaddle their dottles; to let them be free to forage, and to gather round me.

They did this, and the second moon illuminated our little group in such a way that we were as statuary in a wild and primitive garden.

I made use of the one weapon—if one could call it that—allowed me by the Foundation, the weapon of hypnosis. It was a simple trick of misdirection, of concentration, and of final control so that within the space of minutes they lay around me in deep sleep. I made them as comfortable as I could—then, wrapping each in his saddle blanket against

the cold of the night and the heat of tomorrow's sun. They would be here for some time; until I was ready for them.

Then I moved to the back of the hill where I had left the ship. I pressed a belt stud to activate the field around it. Once done I gave the numbers, aloud and strongly: *Three-seven. . . Two-nine. . . Four-one*. I waited, and slowly, slowly, before my eyes the little star-ship took form; first wavering, then becoming more solid. And suddenly there it was, all forty feet of it, snub-nosed and competent.

It was like going home; a movement in time, a shift in perspective.

I entered and once again I was Kyrie Fern, *Adjuster*. Damn the Pug-Boos to hell—and the Kaleen, and all the 'controlled' variable that dared to name me pawn! I had played the game well! What had the Boos done for me, or with me? Other than a propitious band-aid all achievement to date had been *my* doing—mine and the Foundation's. I chose then in my anger to forget that my death had been somewhat delayed in the courtyard of Goolbie's Keep; that in all that had happened, the fine hand of Pug-Boo manipulation had most definitely been juggling the web. In one thing, however, I was right. My contribution had been positive, and the initiative *mine alone*. Whatever the Boos were up to, without me and/or the Foundation, the page they had referred

to might never have been turned at all. So let it be then, I concluded. There was yet a job to do and 'a world to win'. I would play it my way—as if there were no Boos at all.

I settled into the contour seat before the control panel. Within seconds I was a shimmering silvered dot above the brooding green of Marack's forest. I followed the great road, scanning, enlarging wherever a point of interest appeared, but checking each aspect of that well-travelled path. Camelot looked more beautiful from aloft, if such could be possible, than from the ground. I had not appreciated it before. I did now. I would *not* hie me instantly to my Princess as the Pug-Boos had suggested. For, though I truly loved her, I thought her sufficiently strong to stand Vuun stink for a few more tens of hours. I would apply the Foundation-Adjuster-Kyrie-Fern, Sir-Collin finger to the baking pie. . . *I would tie the strings of our far-flung battle lines together!* The Kaleen saw the board as a whole. The forces of Marack did not. I damn-well intended to provide that service, despite the cautioning of the Foundation to redouble the game of hide-and-seek and the smug suggestion of the Boos that I play the game as they saw fit.

Best damn them all. I would indeed be the *Collin*, the hero-mythos, and that was that.

Over forests and rivers, across villages, peasant fields and sparkling

lakes. We were a silvered blue with an enmetaled skin of chamelion potential. We could see and not be seen.

Smoke rose over the dour eyrie of great Castle-Gortfin. I learned later that it had fallen because those of Caronne's loyal subjects within its walls had taken and held the gates in aid of an attack from without. The Yorns and soldiery pledged to the Lady Elioseen had fought to the last for each room, each stair, each cavernous hall beneath that great stone mass. The magick of Elioseen had been evenly matched by that of the king's sorcerer, Fairwyn. The 'magick' of Camelot, created by the Kaleen, and known equally well by north and south had cancelled itself out again and the Lady Elioseen was now a prisoner. The gates to Gortfin were open too; the drawbridge down. A few hundred men had been left to garrison the walls and the banners of the king floated from its highest towers. The Marakian army had moved south as of four days before; they had not waited for Gortfin's fall. When I spotted them they were breaking camp (it was still early morning). Pickets were out, and small parties of cavalry and knights were already moving through the countryside. They were some miles from Gortfin.

I passed over many Kelbian towns and villages; a great plain ringed with rocky hills and one burnt out small volcanic cone known

as the plain of Dunguring, and finally the main port city and capital of Corchoon. The mixed Omnian-Selagian-Kerchian fleet had not yet arrived. This I knew by the sparse shipping in the rather beautiful natural harbor. But a Kelbian army in all its warlike splendor was encamped on the flat and grassy plain some miles to the west of Corchoon. I estimated their strength at a full twenty thousand, and the herds of fat dottles to their rear bespoke a numerous cavalry.

Focusing in on the royal Kelbian tents I bespied King Harlach, and Keilweir, Prince of Kelb, himself, all a'glitter in silvered armor. Two companies of Great Yorns were encamped on their right, along with an equal number of dark Omnian soldiery. . . Of all things they were playing at stits, a game of balls and spears and shields, and they seemed not to have a care in the world. This, when no doubt their spies, falling back before the might of Marack, had told them of the advancing army.

I studied them closely and saw that their lines were well disposed for either attack or defense; depending upon their strength and strategy.

With Omnian forces arriving shortly the deck was definitely stacked. Om's force of 250,000 men, plus the twenty thousand of Kelb, plus whatever Great Ortmund would bring to bear—*plus the possible participation of Vuuns*—all of

it together boded no good for Marack. One would be a fool to think otherwise. I suspected that all this force would move forward to that great plain of Dunguring for that great and final confrontation.

I sent the little craft to north and west, then over the lush coastal valleys and plains, then inland. I crossed the border between Great Ortmund and Kelb at some three hundred miles from Corchoon. Already masses of Ortmundian warriors could be seen making their way towards Kelb's capital. Then more towns. More villages. And, finally, Janblinck, Capital of Great Ortmund. Like Corchoon and Glagmaron, any town that could be called such was protected by a castle. Janblinck Castle was a thing of absolute beauty; an *arras*, a sculptured totality of all things medieval. In an earlier period the vernacular would have referred to it as 'picture-postcard' material. It was exactly that. Perched on a granite hill overlooking a rushing river, with a dozen great turrets, a monstrous encircling ravine with a veritable 'bifrost bridge' as an entry to portcullis and gate—I could only chick-chick with my tongue, and stare.

Further scanning showed it to be well-defended. And I knew that the Marackian Warlords of Keeng, Fleege, and Klimpinge would make no attempt to take it, but rather, would by-pass it for a later storming.

I zipped further inland, like a gad-fly. Ten miles to the foot, be-

yond Castle-Janblinck, I came upon the beginnings of a small battle. My Lord Breen Hoggle-Fitz's five thousand had caught the Ortmundian rear-guard with its back against a craggy pass. They were deployed in the fields before this pass now. And Camelot's rising sun, Fomalhaut, shown upon a scene in which Hoggle-Fitz was preparing to advance against them in classical array: A wing of archers to either flank; foot soldiers and men-at-arms in the center, and a phalanx of heavy cavalry to the front—with Hoggle, himself, at point.

I could see that the Ortmundian rear-guard would meet them with a smaller force but similarly deployed—or so it would seem to Hoggle. From my mile-high vantage point I knew better. To Hoggle-Fitz's right front, completely hidden in a small valley, were additional squadrons of heavy cavalry—half of them Yorns; easily sufficient to turn Fitz's flank. His archers could never sustain the charge they would mount. The ground sloped down from the valley in such a way that the horde's momentum at the point of impact would be terrible indeed.

A small creek split the field, shallow, easily forded, with banks about five feet from water level. It was about forty feet wide. It would present no obstacle to a force prepared for it. Since it was closer to Hoggle-Fitz's array than that of the enemy, it was clear that his entire line would cross this creek long be-

fore any contact with the enemy.

I had perhaps twenty minutes at best to interfere. Two of those minutes were used in landing behind a ridge in a grove of broad-leaved trees. I damped the ship, and moved off, carrying my colors with me. I noted as I topped the rise above Fitz's base camp that a number of animals were also on the ridge. They had chosen this vantage point to watch the battle. Camelot's mammals all seemed to possess this curious proclivity. I procured a likely looking dottle from the herd, had him saddled by the herdmaster, chose a lance from a sufficiency of such at Hoggle's armory, attached my colors to its tip and rode off to smite the heathen. Since the event of Glagmaron's tournament was still rather fresh in the minds of the Marackian warriors I even received a smattering of cheers as I rode through the first ranks on the right flank of Hoggle's now advancing force. The commander of these five hundred archers with his small grouping of men-at-arms welcomed me warmly.

"Ho-la, my Lord," he said, laughing. They were in good spirits. "You come in good moment. We are about to force yonder pass, which should take but a fistful of minutes. Indeed, Sirrah! Though we welcome your prowess, we need it not. Rest here, Sir, and from this vantage point do you observe all that will come to pass."

I raised a gauntleted hand. "Two

things first," I cautioned loudly. "Send you to our good Lord Hoggle-Fitz that you will hold to this side of that little creek. And that he in turn should allow the right wing of his center armored grouping to lag somewhat. This will present a front to a few squadrons of cavalry which will come at you from yon (I gestured) hidden valley. With this precaution—and with your archers positioned to feather their hides with your shafts from *this* side of the creek their disposition will then be upset. And the advance you speak of will then continue. Hurry! For there is not much time."

He didn't bother to ask me how I knew this. He just shook his head and grinned. Within seconds two riders were streaking to the center van where Hoggle-Fitz's pennons waved arrogantly.

We drew up to the creek and halted and positioned ourselves. For the word had passed down the front of our five hundred, too. I focussed my contacts to as many magnitudes as were necessary for a clear scanning of the valley mouth and waited. The newly risen sun being against us, the young commander of our one hundred men-at-arms and five hundred archers—I found later that he was Sir Regis Tornweedi, nephew to the Lord Per-Rondin, Captain of the King's center—was shielding his eyes now. His riders and archers did likewise. And the dottles, sensing action, stamped their paws and whooped. Then I saw

the enemy squadrons. They emerged at a slow gallop which grew, so that when a full five hundred riders had come into view they were already streaking toward the flank of our advancing army in a thundering, shrieking, froth of leveled lances and swinging swords. They were, indeed, a beautiful sight. They wore heavy armor; most of them were *Heggles* or knights, mixed with *Yorns*. There would be, I thought no stopping them, short of a matching force. But that *force* was there.

"They waited too long," I said to young Tornweedi. "They thought us lax in spirit so that we held behind. Now they know not if we will move or not. They have gambled however that we will, else they would have held or veered toward us."

"Aye," Tornweedi said, then "Look, you M'Lord. The Lord of Great Ortmund now slows his center and swings his flank to hold."

And Hoggle-Fitz did just that. And in those few short minutes did we reverse what could have been a signal defeat of Marackian arms. The charge across our front slowed, since they saw too late that we had not moved and did not know to face us or continue on. Their momentum lost, they were yet easier prey to the flights of arrows loosed in good order by our bowmen to the shouts of their sergeants. From five hundred bows there flew as many arrows, and then again and again; each flight taking but five se-

conds for the notching, the draw and the release. The distance was at some two hundred paces, a goodly shot for an archer. And though ours, like all Flegisian warriors, were careful so as to target riders only and not gentle dottles, the distance was too great for accuracy, and the sun an extra obstacle. Tens of riders *and* dottles were already down and screaming.

Fitz's flank did give somewhat at the impact of the mass of the Ortmundian charge. But it held. And because it did, that was the end for Ortmund. By slowing his center almost to a halt the bulk of Fitz's five thousand had remained outside of arrow range. Om and Great Ortmund had but one meaningful alternative then: to fling their remaining 3,500 in headlong assault at Fitz's superior mass. They were confused. They hesitated at a time when to stand still meant certain defeat and death.

Then our archers moved forward, crossing the creek in a long green line; loosing flight after deadly flight into the dwindling ranks of that Ortmundian-Omnian soldiery. So that when the bulk of Ortmund's rear-guard could no longer contain themselves at the slaughter of their own and moved forward against Fitz's center and left flank, it was far too late. Our hundred moved also, across the creek and through our screen of archers to smash into the melee with its remnants of mounted knights and men-at-arms. They were coura-

geous, those warriors of Om. Either that, or possessed by the witchery of the Kaleen. They asked no quarter and gave none. And through all the great dust cloud of battle, the wheeing and whooping of the dottle's, the death shouts of men, the screaming of the wounded, I held back, fighting only to defend myself. I kept to the side of the young nephew of Per-Rondin. Strange fate that I could not protect him from his death. He had, after bearing himself bravely in the hacking fests, been challenged by a Great Yorn in armor of bronze and steel chain. He accepted the challenge. And, as was Flegisian custom, those who were not battling in close proximity stayed their weapons to see its outcome.

Tornweedi chose to rely upon his quickness and the point of his blade rather than compete in the hefty broadsword exchange of shattering blows and the pate-cracking thump of mace and hammer. It proved his undoing in that after they had circled with a fast exchange of steel he bent beneath his shield for a thrust of point to the armor chink between breastplate and greave. He missed in his forward lunge and the Yorn, a huge black-browed and intelligently evil specimen, brought his great sword from across his left shoulder in one whistling sweep to dash the head from poor Tornweedi's shoulders. He then bent, ran sword through waxen cheeks, lifted it, and shook

it mightily above that bloodstained field for all to see.

I could say here that I avenged Tornweedi. But it would not be true. I didn't have to. Indeed, I was not allowed to. The Yorn was attacked from all sides and though he slew three more he was brought down—as were all the others of that fated troop. They had asked for no quarter. They received none. And, in the end, when the field was won and the pass open, I saw that at best there were a hundred prisoners. The field for a full fifty acres around was littered with the bodies of Marackians, Great Ortmundians, and Yorns alike.

It was high noon when the battle ended. Strange how time plays its tricks on the threshold of death. There are periods which are but minutes, but seem like hours. There are others which seem as minutes—such as our fighting before the pass. But four full hours had passed since the squadrons of enemy soldiery rode forth from their defile.

I accompanied Tornweedi's guard to where the Lord Breen Hoggle-Fitz waited on that stricken field. He leaned from the painted saddle of his great dottle to grip my hand and place an arm about my shoulder. His helm was off; his mop of gray hair a wrathful aureole. There were tears in his eyes too, and he stank of blood.

"By Ormon, most noble Collin," he said loudly—to those hardened black-furred warriors around him,

as well as to myself—"By *Wimbly* and by *Harris*. Bless them! Blessed be their names! Bless them! And bless us all who have survived this field! And bless those—" he seemed carried away with himself again, and I said softly, interjecting—"Ah, M'Lord and most courageous companion — my confessor — " he beamed at that one—"I have had news of the Lady Caroween."

His face paled and it was the first time I had seen that happen, so that I knew then where his heart lay. He reached out and took my arm. "Say you so? And what, and how?"

We rode back toward the base camp and food and sviss, and a packing to continue the march forward. And I told him as we rode. And tears rolled down his rugged, puffed and blustering face to such a degree that, I must confess, I was touched and shed a few myself. And in the end I boasted of both Caroween's and Murie's prowess in that battle of the courtyard, so that he called for all to gather round and bade me repeat the story to the gathered knights and warriors.

It was a strange thing in that as I told the tale anew my voice took on the cadence of a minstrel. And that which came from my mouth as prose became poetry. And before the ending of it instruments accompanied me—a lute and a set of the pipes that Angus had used so well. And all this in the bright light of Fomalhaut and its far binary. It

was a strange thing too, in that I spoke to men who had themselves just fought a noble battle; yet here they stood to salute the courage and the prowess of another.

After that we held a war council, and I told them that which I had come to tell them in the first place: "Go not to Janblinck City and Castle Janblinck," I admonished them. "For the armies of Great Ortmund are not there. The king, Feglyn, is on his way now, with all his host, to join with Harlach before the gates of Corchoon in Kelb."

"To which site goes our noble King Caronnel?" one doughty warrior shouted.

"Aye," I said, "and to which site too, there now comes from across the River-Sea the greatest horde of Omnian soldiery that the world has ever seen."

No one asked me, "How know you this?" They asked instead, "How many?" And I told them.

There was a great stirring then among that gathered throng, and a silence while all pondered. The first puffs of an early afternoon breeze blew around us, bringing a scent of wet earth and spring wildflowers to cancel the blood of the field and the sweat of our bodies. A flight of tuckle birds flew over too, with a spate of melodious chirps—like raindrops. The whole scene seemed highly incongruous.

The Lord Hoggle-Fitz, in full command of the knights around him, then said, "It seems then that

we go now to Corchoon or, as young Collin says, to the Plain of Dunguring, by the south oblique road beyond that pass. And that we send to those who follow, the lords of Fleege, Keeng, and Klimpinge, with their fifteen thousand, that they do likewise—and instantly."

"Indeed, I would suggest that," I said.

"And what of the Lord, Fon-Tweel?" Fitz eyed me keenly.

"We will see," I said softly. "But I promise you that his 30,000 and more will be at Dunguring, too."

He stared at me hard, then lowered both his eyes and his voice and said simply, "I see."

The others too looked at the ground and no one questioned me. I had their attention and they were waiting and so I spoke and told them that which they needed to know. "There will be a great battle," I enjoined them. "It will be soon. Tomorrow, the next day, the day after. It will last for as long as is needed to drive the Hordes of Om from the northern shores of the River-Sea. . . your 20,000 will join with the 20,000 of the Marackian King, Caronne. You must then hold until the full force of the Lord Fon-Tweel, plus the warriors of Gheese and Ferlach arrive upon the field. Even then you will be but 10,000 against three times again as many."

If I had thought they would be frightened I would have been less

blunt. But I now knew Camelot and its warriors. All around me eyes had lifted. They literally sparkled with a fierce and warlike joy. "And so then, Sir Collin," a young knight, the first to speak, said boldly. "In no other battle could ever such glory be found. And this for us only: not for them for we are the fewer. I, Great Sir, would have it no other way."

"Nor I! Nor I!" A full hundred voices shouted, and I looked at Fitz and smiled.

"Indeed," he said. "And I join with them, Sir Collin. I would only that my sons were alive to see this."

"Though they be not there," I said, speaking directly and only to him, "I assure you, most noble friend, *that your daughter will be.*"

Tears sprang to his eyes then, for he remained what he was, other than a great warrior of courage and skill; namely an emotional and fanatical old fool. I stepped forward and put my arms about him again. And it seemed that the others took this as some sort of signal in that they moved to disperse and the camp came alive again with the saddling of dottles, the striking of tents and the packing of gear. I moved then to my dottle and Hoggle-Fitz followed.

"Do you ride with us?" His question was rhetorical and he knew it.

"No," I said. I looked at him strongly and tried to emit a bit of an aura myself. "I go," I said, "to

fetch the Princess and your daughter. The Lord Rawl, who has given your red-head moppet to my safe-keeping, would not forgive me were it to be otherwise; nor would the King—nor would *you*, my good friend."

"You are wrong," he said. "I would forgive you. And I shall pray for you now; for though I know not where you go of a certainty, wherever it is, there lies great danger."

"As stated," I said. "I think the battle will be fought on Dunguring Plain. If so, it is there that we will meet again."

"So be it, Sir Collin," he said. And he stared after me as I kicked my dottle's belly with both heels so that she pranced off through the camp to the south and east and up the small hill and beyond to the grove of broad-leaved trees.

Strange, I thought, as I dismounted and slapped her rump so that she would return to the others, the animals who had gathered to watch the battle still lay about, hypnotized, as it were, by that man-made carnage. I had time to wonder as I said the words to phase in the starship, whether *any* were of the planet Alpha, whether just one of those fleeing ships had been, perhaps, an ark.

I lifted straight up, some fifty miles; a high parabola, actually. The city and castle of Glagmaron was directly below on re-entry. I hovered at one mile; scanned at sufficient

magnitudes to be almost at ground level. It was as I expected. The great camp had *not* been broken. Fon-Tweel's 30,000 were at ease.. They played at skits and flats; they gambled away their mustering fees, and they dueled in the sun. And that was about the extent of it. As stated, it was what I expected. Fon-Tweel had no intention of going anywhere; either to Gheese and Ferlach to impress upon the rulers of those countries the urgency of their joining with the King of Marack against Om—or to Dunguring before Corchoon to the aid of his king. Those loyal in the camp—and I supposed this to encompass the whole—would not know of his treachery until it was too late.

So be it. I would return, for I indeed, had a singular message for Fon-Tweel.

I maintained an altitude of one mile, sweeping over the terrain in a southerly direction at a slow speed. I had time. Like all I had seen so far the countryside was wild; great forests of oak and pine; great rivers and serrated mountain chains which swept, I knew, down to the River-Sea. These I naturally rose above, and down again until finally, I had crossed into Gheese where its border impinges both upon that of Marack and Ferlach. It was here, I knew, that a battle was being fought. And it was here I hoped to find Rawl, hobnobbing with Draslich, Ferlach's King; waiting until

Fon-Tweel arrived to do his part with Chitar of Gheese; so that, impressed with Marack's call to common cause—and the strength of Fon-Tweel's army—a meeting then would take place.

I was right in only one thing. Sir Fergis' blazonry topped a field tent in the proximity of that of King Draslich; all this on a broad and boulder-strewn field overlooking a sparkling stream. Across that stream was a second army. The colors of Gheese and of her king, Chitar stretched a full mile over an equally grassy field well strewn with granite boulders. Here and there on both banks spears and lances stood erect denoting the fact that a warrior was buried there. From my vantage point I could see additional hundreds of unburied dead—common men-at-arms, archers. The inconclusive fighting had gone on here for quite some time. I brought the star-ship down as before in an area surrounded by wild clumps of bracken and heavy forest, careful so that I would come to ground on the far side of a hill.

It was done, and I took some time to bathe away the marks of the morning's battle before the pass in Great Ortmund from my body. Then, armor re-burnished surcoat and furred cloak most carefully cleaned and spotted, and sundry preparations made—and I repeat — I had the time for this I did not intend to spring myself upon Rawl until dusk fell, I stepped

forth. Again I was fully armed, fal-dirk, shield, broadsword, and small mace. I waved the star-ship back to its exclusive warp and walked to the crest of the ridge.

It was most pleasant, like that first day when I had awaited the coming of the Princess on the south road. The thought of Murie now, and that she sat alone and miserable in Vuun caves, 'surrounded by Vuun stink, awaiting my coming—for I had promised, and this was Camelot, and it was unthinkable that I would not do exactly that—made me somewhat ill.

Oh, that magick *did* prevail, I thought. For it would truly be that best of all worlds, so sought after by humanoids across all time and space. A release from needed knowledge; from the constant search for the why and the wherefore of it all. How simple would life be if that were so—no constant 'H', no law of inverse squares; to be surrounded forever by the world of childhood with its ogres; its fairies, its sleeping princesses, and its never-never-lands.

I lay myself down then on a broad and heavy tuft of grass overlooking the great and martial camp of Ferlach's king. Herds of dottles foraged below me. Beyond them were tents and cooking pots and fires. Above in the bowl of azure sky was a pattern of cirrus-cumulous clouds. Flights of strange birds and flutterings of smaller winged creatures were all around me. At one

point during the afternoon's progress I felt eyes on me and clapped hand to sword and sat up smartly. Peering through a clump of heavy foliage was the double-horned head of a massive gerd, such as Hoggle-Fitz had claimed as steed. I stared him back and after seconds he shook his head and left. He seemed possessed of a strange intelligence. . .

Then I dozed, to be awakened some time later by a blast of trumpet upon the still air. I noted with alarm that the sun was fast setting. I arose on both elbows and peered over the ridge. Of the two river fords visible from my vantage point, a grouping of knights were gathered at one—and this on the Ferlach side. From the tents of the Gheesian army a line of mounted knights and warriors were trotting to the ford. At the head of the line were the proud pennons and banners of Chitar and sundry great lords of Gheese. And to Chitar's right floated, on lance-tip, Rawl Fergis' colors of three scarlet bars upon an azure field. Good lad! I mentally cheered him. He had not waited for the strength of Fon-Tweel. How he had managed this tete-a-tete I knew not. But he had achieved what I had planned—set the stage for a meeting between Chitar and Dreslich. Even as I watched the royal banners of Dreslich — an oak tree against a blood-red sky—moved out to greet the Black Swan pennons of Chitar in mid-stream. Protocol, I remembered, demanded no less.

There was another hurried blowing of trumpets then, and a cheering and hurraing, and someone, perhaps, flipped a Ferlachian obsol, and Chitar lost so that both sides then retired with all pomp and ceremony in the direction of Draslich's great war tent.

As stated I had dozed far too long, and dusk was falling. It was obvious that they feared not dead-alives in war camps such as these, nor treachery either. For Camelot's chivalry said that Chitar would stay with Draslich and no fal-dirk would find his ribs in the wee hours.

Below me a small group of dottles had wandered close in their foraging so that they were within hailing distance. I whistled shrilly and they looked up and wagged their doggy-ears in unison. They peered anxiously around them. I stood full up. Darkness was gathering so rapidly that just as the scene below at camp was dim to me now, so would my person be equally to them. I whistled again and the dottles advanced toward me, seeing me now so that their tails too were waving. One fat-tummied female approached me braxenly, her big blue eyes inviting nose pats and friendly thigh rubs. They gathered round and I spoke gently to them and mounted the female after tossing my furred cloak over her back for a saddle, so that my armor would not hurt her. Then we led off and pranced our way down to the great camp

with its teeming warriors.

Aboard the small star-ship I had touched up the heraldry upon my shield so that the sprig of violets against its field of gold now glowed with a most delightful luminescence. Two other things did I do: one, the creation of a *null* magnetic field about my person which, if I had the wisdom to use it before, may well have protected me from the power of the Kaleen at Goolbie's Keep. I doubted it, on second thought however, since Pawbi would not have allowed such an overt indication of anti-Kaleen power. Two: I activated the ion beam upon my belt and turned it upon myself in such a way that my armor, like Hoggle's at the great tournament, glowed with a gold and whitish light. To say that my arrival within the camp of the king of Ferlach evoked some interest was definitely an understatement.

I rode straight and tall, glowing shield slung from my back. My left hand was buried in my dottle's fluffy mane to direct her, my right hand was on the hilt of my great sword. They fell away from me in awe; first cooks and helpers, then whole coveys of archers and men-at-arms from the hundred fires through which I passed. Most crossed themselves with the circle and cross of Ormon; some kneeled and bent their heads. Finally, at the great block of tents surrounding that of the king, I was given escort. Knights and lords

not summoned to the council ringed me round—not closely, but at a distance. Nevertheless I was *ringed*. And I wondered, if, despite their magick and/or the gods, they would fight me if they thought it necessary. The answer in my mind was 'yes'. For, as the Lord Per-Rondin had said: *And if their magick prevail oer ours, then will we fight them with our blood and with our hearts!*" And so it was on Camelot. . .

As I neared the entrance to the king's tent, those in front turned round and ranged themselves before the entrance, swords drawn. They would defy me. Inside, the king's council, attracted by the hub-bub, sent forth certain lords to inquire as to the reason. Needless to say, the guard of Chitar, also in the proximity of the tent, drew their swords nervously in defense of ought that would befall their Lord. I sat my little dottle silently; stared boldly at the lot of them, and glowed mightily with a kaleidoscope phosphorescence. Then I dismounted, shooed my gracefull dottle off, turned round, placed my two hands upon my belt, leaned back my head and bellowed: "NOW HEAR ME ALL: GREAT LORDS; KNIGHTS AND WARRIORS; I HIGHT *THE COLLIN* OF MARACK; COME TO HAVE CONVERSE WITH YOUR KINGS AND WITH MY FRIEND THE GOOD SIR FERGIS WHO IS NOW WITHIN THIS TENT. AND I WOULD HAVE HIM FORTH AND

NOW!"

The name of the COLLIN, not being a part of the folk-lore of Marack alone, but a mythos owned by all above the River-Sea, struck home. And some fell back and some drew sword in anger at this most audacious claim. One Lord stepped fully forward. He threw back his cloak, drew sword and held it firmly in quate or attack position while he asked bluntly, loudly; "Who are you, Sir, who *dare* to take the name of *Collin* and so approach us thusly? Speak out and clear your name or I shall clear your head from your body despite its glow-worm shine."

He was a brave man and I hesitated for I did not wish to kill him. I didn't have to.

"*Leave be!*" The voice was Rawl's. He stepped forth from the tent's interior, followed by two broadly-grinning armored students of the tournament of Glagmaron. I noted then that there were others of Rawl's hundred scattered sparcely through the crowd. They made way for him, my auburn-furred friend; even the lord who had challenged me, for he was emissary of Marack and this gave him stature and much substance. Rawl came almost directly up to me through the line provided. He stared me fully in the eye, his own half twinkling at my shining; half fearful of what he did not understand. He said simply, "How, now, My Lord?" and fell to one knee before me. His students did

likewise. Then he arose and faced the others. "Whatever you may say or think," he said bluntly, "this great warrior is THE COLLIN! And he will be with me in council. I offer my life in forfeit that he comes in good will; that no harm but rather sooth shall reign throughout for the fact of his presence here. Now make us way, M'Lords!"

"Indeed make way!"

The voice was strong and came from a giant of a man with black eyes, great curling beard, and a mop of ebon hair with rampant fur to match. Thus had I heard Draslich described. "I would see this COLLIN," he shouted, "about which our young lord of Marack has spoken well. And so would my bold companion here." He nodded to a squat and heavily muscled torso topped by a leonine head with piercing eyes on his right, whom I took to be Chitar, King of Gheese. Behind the both of them two tall and cloaked figures stood: King's sorcerers by their garb. Though their presence cancelled each other, I had time to wonder if they would try their tricks on me. I was glad for the slightly ruptured field around me, for if they tried, they would soon see that all their wiles would come a cropper.

Rawl reached to take my hand, felt the strange dissonance of the field and withdrew it sharply. "Fear not." I looked him directly in the eye. "Tis but a passing thing." He

nodded and Draslech bade us enter the tent so that he led off and I followed.

All and sundry had been at sup. And, in true Camelot style, after I had seated myself between Rawl and Chibu, one of our newly heggled students, the sup commenced again. I truly think that if the Kaleen himself had joined a Marackian, Gheesian, Ferlachian, Kelbian (anti-Om), Great Ortmundian dinner, nought would be said at all about sundry 'quarrels' and 'differences' til after the final fruit course and swiss. I was indeed hungry. My slight magnetic rupture hindered in no way the passing of gog-meat to gullet.

I noted too that neither the Pug-Boos, Mool, of Ferlach, or Riis, of Gheese, were present and I remembered that Pug-Boos did not go to war.

There had to be an end as usual. And when it came Ferlach's King Draslech wasted no time in dissimulation. He simply arose, begged his cohort Chitar's permission, as was proper, and spoke directly to me.

"Sir Collin," he said, and there was no hint of sarcasm in his saying. "We have heard something of you from our brother, King Caronne's emissary, so we think in a way that we know you . . . We are gathered here this night—with our common sport most sadly interrupted—" He looked around the gathered host at this sally for expected humorous applause—and got them: "We are gathered here at the call of your young

lord, who we might add, is most persuasive. He has told us on the one hand of a threat to all the lands above the River-Sea. He has also suggested that there be forces from Marack on the way which," he smiled broadly, "could perhaps help us settle our differences here so that we would see Marack's wisdom in asking for unity before the common danger. To date, Sir Collin, and you, Sir Rawl Fergis, though we are aware of the peril from the forces of the Kaleen, we have yet to see the arrival of our brother's thirty thousand under the lord, Fon-Tweel. In fact, we see only this young man with his cortege of youthful knights—and you—all aglow like unto the *Childe Harris*. And you come to us upon a saddleless dottle.

"Perhaps, now, Sir Collin, you could inform us further of the intricacies of these strange goings on, and where mayhaps this will all lead."

He sat down and there were shouts all around—friendly most; but some were demanding, so that I was strongly aware that this was not the feast hall of Glagmaron but the campaign tent of two great northern kings. Rawl looked anxiously to me, as did his Marackian student-heggles. I smiled strongly back at them to give them confidence and slowly rose. When fully on my feet I moved from the table to the open space within the great inverted 'U's' of wood and trestle.

Again I placed hands on hips and

stared them all straight in the eyes; not with arrogance, but with an intensity and a seriousness which I hoped would set them all on edge. "My good King of the land of Ferlach: My good King of the land of Gheese: and my Lords all, and knights, and true warriors within my voice. Just as there be traitors in Kelb and Great Ortmund—and I speak of your brother kings, Harlach and Feglyn—so are there others in Marack, and perhaps your own tight domains. In Marack's case I refer specifically to Fon-Tweel, Lord of Bist. Six days have passed. The armies of Marack have been in battle at Gortfin, and this day, too, before the Veldian Pass in Great Ortmund. Caronne's forces are deploying even now before the great plain of Dungguring in Kelb. . . And even now, forsooth, I too see no Lord, King's emissary, in your midst; nor do I see his minions encamped beyond the hills—Nay, Sires! The Lord Fon-Tweel is not here. He will not be here for his forces have yet to decamp from Glagmaron. And I say to you that this be treason; not just to Marack but to all lands of the north, as you shall see!"

I took a deep breath and held them all silently with what I supposed was a steely, commanding glare—*Adjusters are, above all else, consummate actors.* "So be it!" I then announced firmly. "It is enough, that you know now that our king, Caronne; his sorcerer, Fairwyn; the Lord Per-Rondin, and sundry other

Councillors were most wise in sending our most gracious young knight, Sir Rawl Fergis to implement the 'diplomacy' of Fon-Tweel. *Mayhap they knew of Fon-Tweel's leanings.* Sir Fergis, it appears, has done his job, and well.

"But now I say you all, Sir Knights, and my Lords and Kings, THERE IS NO MORE TIME TO WASTE. For at this moment there cometh to our northern coasts; to the great harbor of Corchoon in Kelb, thrice one thousand long ships—250,000 Omnian warriors; among these some fifty thousand Great Yorns and sundry cavalry. This force, added to that which Kelb and Great Ortmund do present—to-wit, an additional fifty thousand men-at-arms, archers, and belted squires and *heggles*—is indeed something to consider."

A murmuring swept the assemblage at my most obvious understatement—"And confronting them, M'Lords," I continued, "barring the roads to Marack and to Gheese and Ferlach; Aye! to domination of all our free and northern shores there stands but forty thousand noble warriors of our Marackian King." I paused, then said, "And that is it, M'Lords, and I be blunt and brief.

"You know the enemy! You know now the stakes—namely your lives and countries! Will you sit idly here in dalliance, with but sundry games of 'flats' across yon river while this greatest battle of all time will come to pass? Will you, indeed,

present your myriad necks in line-up, like gogs at slaughter-time, for the dark Kaleen's pleasure? Will you indeed allow this glory to be Marack's alone if victory comes—and you be not there to share it? What say you? What say you now?

I stepped back, raised my two hands above my head dramatically and slowly pivoted to face them all. The yelling was thunderous. And some were against me for, what they said, was my insulting tone. Indeed, there were those, hands on sword hilts, who thrust themselves forward. And there were others who held them back. Outside the great tent, the word having been passed but instantly with the telling, additional howls and shouts of approbation and defiance came like waves from the furthest perimeter of the camp.

The sorcerers of Ferlach and Gheese had risen. And, as they moved round the table, the yelling quieted so that an equal wave of silence followed their gliding figures. They were of the same mold as Caronne's Fairwyn and Goolbie, and the young neophyte, Angus: skinny, ethereal, self-contained, wary and curious. Their hands were upraised. And thus the silence. They approached to within a few feet of me and halted. One could have, literally, heard a dubot squeak . . .

They looked me in the eye and there was no fear in them. "The auras," the tallest of the two said finally, and in a clear, high voice,

"are most evident here, M'Lords. *But there is no evil.* This young man, who glows with the light of Om and Harris, seems not quite of this world."

There was a muttered roll of ah's and oh's at that and the shorter of the two stepped one pace forward. They had apparently arranged some test between them for, just as they had thrown a field of force about their kings—and another around themselves—they sought to do some *thing* to me. The shorter sorcerer; he was of Ferlach and his name was Gaazi, while his companion was called Plati—began his words. He was joined in measured cadence by Plati. They watched me sharply. I smiled evenly back at them. Their own protective aura was something other than null magnetism I was using. What they intended was powerful though not deadly, since they did not seek to destroy me but to learn my strength. Whatever it was, however, it simply didn't work. And, after the required number of seconds for protocol, so that they would know they had been given every chance, I stepped back and bowed in the graceful, sweep, swirl, dip, and general genuflection which was the Camelotian gesture of respect and obeisance. . .

"It is not wise," I said to them, "to tarry longer with your spells and enchantments. Why it is that they will have no effect on me, I know not. Indeed, as our good Sir Rawl Fergis will tell you, there are things about me that I do not know

myself. Perhaps tis true that I am possessed; that in this time of need and great peril for all a part of the *Collin's* power has come to me. Perhaps tis true that for the nonce *I hight the Collin!*"

At this last—said somewhat more softly, you may be sure— I dropped my head in a most humble attitude, and all within voice began to cheer again.

Draslech arose, tall, black, and commanding. He waved a hand and a cushioned chair was brought me, upon which I instantly sat. A flagon of swiss was brought too, and I drank. . . "Sir Harl—Sir Collin," the King said. "My Lord Gane of our great City Port of Reen"—and he gestured toward a black-furred grinning giant—"bespeaks me that you fought bravely with him some three years ago against the Selig pirates. He says he remembers you as a loud-mouthed, courageous youth with much spirit and few brains. He tells me," the King smiled, "that you are much changed."

Laughter spread around us like summer rain, and I joined in. "Refer me kindly to my Lord," I said. "He may still be right. And I may revert at the end of this affair to being as addleheaded as before. If such the case, or otherwise, I would still call him friend and he but call me his." I basked in the smattering of applause.

Chitar arose then, red hair a flaming aureole about his equally flaming face. He paused to finish a

drought of swiss before speaking; then wiped his lips with a sleeved arm. . . "I would simply ask," he said quietly, "how you know all this. I have seen much of magick in my day. . . I doubt not that the dark Kaleen prepares for battle; nor that your King, Caronne, doth oppose him. But how know you, Sir, the scope of the fighting? And how know you of the ships and men, and what transpires with the warriors of Kelb and Great Ortmund? How know you all these things?"

"My Lord," I answered loudly and bluntly. "I know now how I know; except to say that with these eyes I saw the force of Marack and of Kelb this very morning. And if, perchance, you were to meet the Lord Breen Hoggle-Fitz of Durst in Great Ortmund, at some future date, he will tell you that I fought with him at high noon this very day before the pass of the Veldian mountains. Think on that—but not for long—for if *I* know not the answer, then, Sir, *how can you?*"

At that exact moment I caused the ion beam to intensify so that my armor glowed more brilliantly. Then I let it die; but not before sundry coveys of 'oh's' and 'ah's' were elicited from that gathered throng at both my words and glowing. And this too, in a gathered candle-light, since all without was total darkness now.

I arose again then, and continued—strongly, as if in anger and frustration. "There is this too, oh Great

King of Gheese. If your mighty host—with all additional troops that he can gather—does not go in haste to the field of Dunguring, then to Marack will fall the total honor. And, if we go down to bloody death, *yours alone will be the shame*, in that all the countries of the north-land were put in Omnian chains, *by you*, for all eternity.”

There was a roar then such as I had never heard before. And some were for instant departure. And some were for personal battle with me, in that, perhaps, Marackian chains also awaited those who departed sovereignty for the beck of someone else's master. I stood silently until finally, above the crash of sword on shield and pike-butt against hardened earth, the voices of Draslich and Chitar prevailed. Draslich, after short consultation, summed it up in one brief paragraph. “We shall go to Dunguring, Sir Collin,” he said. “Together we are a host of forty thousand. We shall arrive on the eve of the third day, for tis a full six-hundred miles, and even noble dottles cannot travel faster, though we mount *all* our men as is our wont.”

“If twill be three days,” I interrupted solemnly, “you will may-chance arrive to a stricken field. Om and the Kaleen count on this: that the five countries of the north-land be split; that if they do join finally in mutual pact, that it cannot be implemented in sufficient time to matter. Marack is before Dungur-

ing and Corchoon *now* and marshalls its array for battle. Our king has but twenty thousand men. The Lord, Hoggle-Fitz rides to him with the Lords of Keeng, Flege and Klimpinge, and another twenty thousand. They will join in two days. However, M' Lords, the forces of Om will land on the morrow and the next. I suspect that on that *third* day a great joining of battle will take place. And if you can but hold through that *third* day, then will I arrive with the thirty thousand and *more* who now camp before fair Glagmaron under the false Lord, Fon-Tweel.”

All at the tables had seated themselves again, since council had seemingly begun. Chitar, chin cupped on palm, asked curiously, thoughtfully, trying to probe beyond my eyes: “You have not said, fair knight, how we may cross six-hundred miles in but two days. I would be apprised of this.”

“You have sufficient dottle herds for hard riding?”

“We do, indeed.”

“Then, M' Lord, you ride at night as well.”

“At night?”

“Aye!”

“Are you some fiend of *Ghast*? What *are* you, truly, Sir?”

“I hight *The Collin*! And if you seek to aid Marack and all the north, then, great sirs, *you will ride at night*.”

When I think back on it now I

am sure that not until that very moment were they fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. That I had asked them to ride at night brought it home. All were silent; their faces strained and white. I called for sviss. The others did likewise. And the quiet continued. And it was as if we were in the very eye of a great hurricane. Then Chitar glanced at Draslich, and Draslich nodded, and Chitar rose.

"My Lords all," he began solemnly. "Bear with us for we *are* your leige lords. It would seem from what The Collin has told us, that all that has been will be as nought, do we not follow in Marack's path. It is also true that our northland will not survive our absence from the field of Dunguring—if it survive at all. Therefore would we be there to lift our swords against the night of Om. It promises to be a battle unlike to anything our world has ever seen. And twill be at a place where, thinking on some future time, all men—who call themselves such—will curse the cause of their own absence, what ere the reason. So finally, noble sirs, if this be sooth—then what, indeed, is one more broken shibboleth?

"That we will truly fight the might of Om should first be seen in that we will dare to ride the blackness of tomorrow's night. *We will ride tomorrow, Sirs, and on tomorrow's night, and on the day thereafter.* And in this way we will arrive in time for one night's sleep,

and to battle on the third day's morning. And if we hold, as this young man prays we do, then on the morn of the fourth day will we receive the thirty thousand of Glagmaron, *and more*, for the battle's end, whatever that may be. . . How say you, now, Sirs? Stand up and give me voice!"

If there had been clamor before it was as nothing to the shouting and hurraing that now arose. A great fever, it seemed, of an almost religious fervor, swept all the tent and the massed warriors without. I learned later that Chitar's twenty thousand had even marched to the river to hear the news and all that transpired from the shouted words, of men strung down to the very water's edge. I knew then what 'holy wars' were like; crusades; even the infantile idiocy of call to flag and country, for the usual, *ill-hidden*, reason of a re-apportioning of the 'goodies'. . . In our case, however, since the stakes were what they were and, indeed, according to the Boos, their total meaning lay hidden, even now—our ends did most certainly justify our means.

I switched off the ion-beam and ceased to glow. I glanced at the two sorcerers; they smiled back at me. I was about to cancel the null magnetic warp too, but thought better of it. Though harm would no longer come from the sorcerers, the Kal-*een* still loomed large on my person-

al horizon. I signalled to Rawl, arose and went to my original place at the great table. Then, while Draslich and Chitar and the great lords of the two countries planned their march—a full 120,000 dottles and 40,000 men in a thundering charge across six hundred miles of mountain, plain, and river—I told him of his Lady, Caroween; of our trip to the Snowlands, and of the great fight in the courtyard of Goolbie's Keep. I put my arm around him when I came to the loss of his lady and my own. And well I did. For in the telling he grew hot-eyed, clapped hand to fal-dirk, and in his anger would have sought some quarrel with me had not my presence and his reasoning prevailed.

"What now, then, Collin?" he asked bluntly. "Where do *you* now? With us? To Glagmaron? To Vuunland? Where go you, Sir; for I would go there too."

"You cannot!"

"Indeed?"

"Aye, indeed! The Marackian fleet of some five hundred ships, come down from Klimpinge, should be off Ferlach's port city of Reen now. You will ride with your hundred to join it, to tell of all that has transpired so that they will know; to see that all remains well in that the greatest unity is forged then with the fleets of Ferlach and Gheese, so that—and they should number at least two-thousand all gathered—when you appear off Corchoon in Kelb four days from now, the Om-

nian fleet will know your strength. It is desired," I improvised simply, "that no ship of the Omnian fleet now on northern shores will ever see the southern continent again."

"I am no sailor, and I would go with you."

"You cannot!"

"Collin!" Rawl said softly, and his purple eyes against the bold Auburn of his skin and fur were deeply unhappy. "I was not born to tread the planks of ships. I would fight Vuuns and rescue Caroween and your lady. I believe you well in that you did this day fight in the battle of the Veldian Pass. I would with you to Vuunland, for I know you go there; though I know not how you go."

"It cannot be," I said again; And we were now ignored and therefore jostled by the shouting, milling throng around us, with couriers coming and going, and all the marks of great movement beginning to develop. The two kings were no laggards in the marshalling of armies. "It cannot be," I repeated. "But I promise you one thing, good friend."

"Which is?"

"That when next you see me—if that is to happen—you will be with the Lady Caroween and the Princess Murie Nigaard, and Hoggle-Fitz, and all the great lords of Marack *on the plain of Dunguring*."

"What mean you? *If* that is to happen?"

"Why, despite what things may seem," I said, "I am as human, and

therefore as vulnerable to death, as you."

Rawl clutched my arm then, hard, Then his eyes shown suddenly bright, glistening with joy of my knowledge. "Hey, now," he said exhuberantly, "Live, Collin! For mayhap we have much to do—even beyond this war."

I frowned. "And what means that?"

"That there is a great and unknown world beyond the River-Sea."

We were interrupted by Rawl's two student guards. They had heard my admonishment to Rawl that he was to go with the fleet from Reen in Ferlach, to Saks in Gheese, and thence to Corchoon in Kelb. They liked it not; nor did the remainder of the hundred. "Do not deny us, Sir," they begged, "the privilege of Dunguring."

I could not say them nay. "Cast lots," I said. "The ten of you who lose will accompany Sir Rawl to the fleet; the remainder will join my lords of Gheese and Ferlach for the ride to Marack and Dunguring."

We left them, Rawl and I, to go joyously off to gamble, while we joined the two kings and their lords at the great table. I cut the null magnetic field so that where I touched, but the faintest tingle would remain. This for my safety, and their surprise. We shook hands, with left hand to the shoulder; and the eyes of Draslich and Chitar lifted in amusement.

"You hight indeed a *something*," Draslich said. "Sith it be 'The Collin'

I know not. But I will call you friend, withal. For I think you good liege to my brother king, Caronne."

Chitar mumbled similar kudos, and then asked sharply: "And do you ride with us, Sir Collin?"

"No," I said, taking that opportunity to arise and step me back some paces. "No, M'Lords. I go to another place, and then to Glagmaron. Recall, I said to you that I would bring all Fon-Tweel's thirty-thousand—plus his head—to Dunguring."

"You make as if to leave us now," Draslich said.

"That I do, M'Lords—wi your permissions."

"Or without them," Chitar grinned. "Nay! Nay!" He raised a muscular arm in laughter; "Let the deliberations of kings not delay you, oh Collin. . . Just do your promised thing and bring us the thirty-thousand—else, I warn you, Sir, you will answer to me when next I see you."

I bowed deeply, saluting all with the intricacies of sweep, swirl, and dip. Then I pressed the ion beam to glow again; walked with Sir Rawl Fergis to my fat and wheeing dottle, vaulted upon her fur-cloaked back, and bid that gathered throng outside the tent a hearty farewell.

In a sense it was like running a gantlet. Though the long double line to the edge of the cooking tents brandished no clubs, they did hold swords and spears aloft, which they brought crashing down upon their

shields in thunderous cadence. The cheering was deafening too, and I kept my arm raised in salute as I rode, my armor all ablaze.

At one point a herd warden—by the insignia on his jupon—yelled over the clamor all around him: "Where didst thou find my lovely dottle, Zelpha, Great Collin?"

"She came to me," I shouted back.

"Then keep close rein," he cautioned loudly. "For like my own true wife, she tends to stray."

The ensuing roar of laughter was followed by more 'hails' and 'aves,' and Rawl and I continued on. At the edge of the tents, and therefore at the edge of darkness, we halted. "I would leave you here, Sir Fergis," I said.

"Just like that, M'Lord?"

"Exactly."

"So let it be—an we meet again at Dunguring."

"We shall meet," I said, "perhaps before; I promise you." We shook hands and I turned and left him there; and beyond him all the others who had ringed the fires to watch.

As I kned my dottle, Zelpha, toward the darkness of the grassy fields and the small hill beyond which was my ship, I damped the ion beam so that I would begin to fade; so that in their eyes I would now slowly disappear.

Minutes later at the top of the hill, I dismounted and gave that overly friendly Zelpha a rump pat to send her on her way. I was not

surprised when she swiftly turned her head to give me a quick and blubbery kiss such as Pug-Boos oft receive from dottles, and clicked her heels and ran off to the herd. . . I wiped my face with my surcoat hem and smiled.

I slept in the star-ship, insulated from all Pug-Boo probes. They had suggested one thing; that thing I would do. I was not about to accept interference from them now, on any level—or from my cohorts of the Deneb-3 either. I slept well for I was exceedingly tired. Toward morning, since controls had been set, I was most gently massaged by bed-fingers. More, I was bathed and, oiled with a most healing flesh-ungeant, so that when I actually did arise, it was as a phoenix from one's proper fire. Erstwhile Terran fanatics would call it 'being born again.' I too clicked my heels like dainty Zelpha and went to breakfast.

It was still night, the way I wanted it. Vuunland was next; Vuunland and Murie. And now that all else had been done, I allowed myself to think of her; of that elfish, piquant, great-eyed face; of that small body that was so fantastically feminine that even now, were I to dwell upon it, I would develop one damn large pain in my gut. . . "All right! Shield Maiden!" I exclaimed aloud to the control panel of the star-ship. "Your bold and brilliant lover is on his way." I mumbled a few other platitudes such as 'Fear not the night, my coozy,' and 'A

Murie by any other name would be as edible. . . ' and such like that.

As I plummeted south, across the night side of Flegis-Camelot, I seemed to follow the path of Riple, the second and smaller moon. And it, in turn, seemed trailing the wake of Capil, the larger and brighter.

Again, I had time. Requested data about Vuuns and Vuunland, had been given me in the 'instant tape' from the Deneb-3. Though the creatures had long been thought extinct by those of the northern countries, *Watchers* had known of their continued existence through pirates, prisoners, and the few Selig tradersmen who dared the sea to northern cities. . . One had but to go to where they once held forth, and that in the great mountains to the east of Om, itself. Thrice two thousand miles, the distance was. How fast, I wondered, did a Great Vuun fly?

I dropped low in the protective darkness to skim the waters of the River-Sea. I passed over many hundreds of tropical islands, then a calm; then a raging storm with the visible fury of great phosphorescent waves.

Then I was over the continental land mass of Kerch, and beyond that to jungle and high savannah; rivers and teeming life such as was not listed in *Watcher* data, except for mountain Yorns. Flegis-Camelot possessed a myriad of life forms, of which the Great Vuuns were but one.

Om began with the high-ground,

the plains, and the lofty mountains in chain on chain. I regretted that I had no time for all that night-bathed grandeur. My goal was the easternmost alps called Ilt on our maps and matrix. There were only trackless wastes below. Indeed, other than the few paths from Omnian cities to the northern ports of Kerch and Selig, across those thousands of miles of plain and jungle, the southern continent, like the north, was virgin territory. I had time to wonder what truly lay in all those massive forested jungled wastes, that was of Camelot-Flegis alone, and not derived of the tragic refugees of Fomalhaut II's *Alpha*. . .

The Vuuns, I had learned, were telepaths which, when you think on it, should have told us something. Whatever. I was keyed to a contact with them. I slowed the star-ship so that to ground view I would seem as a floating baubled facsimile of 'St. Elmo's fire'. . . I relaxed wholly in the encompassing contour chair before the ship's screen; letting my mind be open, fallow, receptive to all that might come. And I had not long to wait. Though I had tried this once before, thinking the Pug-Boos would take advantage, nothing had happened. I thought now that it would be ludicrous indeed, if those same Boos chose to interfere. Even the Kaleen might join in the hook-up were he aware that such existed. But he or 'it' did not, and I held no fear that he would. Instead I received first twirblings, half-formed pictures, imagery, disconnected thoughts of

lesser Flegisian creatures; for all simple animals in their formative, evolving years, have the potential for telepathy. And finally, to my S.O.S. of "I would speak to you! I would speak to you!" there came an answer.

"Who speaks? Who on all this world save us and that which lies in the tomb of Hish, has power to speak?" The projected thought words were icy, cold, insistent. They formed an alien web that seized upon my mind so that I felt a sudden, abysmal, soul-choking fear. I did not reply at once. Instead I ceased my probe completely and listened, regaining composure. Again the question: "Who speaks? Who speaks to us who have known the world forever? Who speaks to us? Say again, and now; and know that your life will not be forfeit."

"I speak!" I then said boldly. "And I would meet with you, and would you tell me how and where."

"Who are you? What are you?"

"I am one of those of which you are informed, but I am different. I would have council with you. I would not, nor could not harm you, nor you myself. But there is that which you should know which only I can tell. Bid me where now to go, and how."

How know we that you cannot harm us?"

"I am a man of the northern world of which you know. Can such harm you? Look now at me and all that I truly am." I projected a self image so they would know. "How

canst I harm thee?"

There was a great silence which lasted and lasted so that I became sore afraid that they had broken contact and would not come again. "Hear me!" I said. "I would speak with you! I would speak with you!"

"Oh, simple Man," the thought came through, and strongly. "What would you say to us who have lived forever? Why do you come at all? Well we know that we are the dragons of your dreams, and the horror of your play in childhood. What want you now of us who bring you nought but death?"

"I would speak," I said, "of that which lies in Hish, and of what it plans for you. For though it be true that I cannot harm, no Vuun now living will survive the thing with which you now enjoin, sith you continue in your path."

"You are aflight," the voice came again. "We see you now as a glowing thing in darkling skies. Why should we not strike you down and end our fear of you—and yours of us?"

"You could not do that."

"Then indeed you can harm us."

"But I would not," I insisted.

"Whereas that in Hish, for which you now do service, can truly bring you nought but death."

"And so have we begun to think. Yea, we will see you; and do you harm us, we have two of yours that likewise will be harmed."

"I know this," I said bluntly. "Now through my eyes I see the

following—and it is for you to guide me.” And I told them of serrated chains of mountains, and chasms, all covered with snow since it was winter in this southern clime. They gave me directions so that I selected one great valley with giant conifers at its bottom and emplaned with twisted, stunted growths of evergreens on its precipitous slopes and craggy ridges. We went full up its length to where white water sprang from a high precipice beyond which lay another, tighter valley of barren blasted rock and night-cliffs. In contrast to the wintry white of snow and grey-black granite, the great surrounding peaks were volcanic. From them poured an empurpled mass of flame, so that the dawn sky was laced with a kaleidoscope of hellish colors. . . I was bade to enter this shallow valley, which I did. At its furthest end there arose great cliffs to the height of the final base of volcanic mountains. These, other than their glowing cones—from which I was pleased to see there came no lava—were snow-girt round and perma-iced. Three quarters of the way up the sheer black cliffs (some six thousand feet) at the valley’s end were the mouths of great caves, indented somewhat in that before them was a ledge; full circle for some ten miles. To left and right were other cliffs and ledges and caves, so that I knew that here, indeed, were the homes of Vuuns.

“Where be you then?” I asked.

“Of all these caves I know nought which—and further: he or those with whom I talk must have authority for decision. For in what I do there is little time. I would not spend it idly.”

“We are three,” the voice of the Great Vuun said. “We are council *and* authority.”

“One thing,” I said. “Bring the two of whom you spoke, for I would see that they are unharmed.”

“Indeed!” The voice grew colder still, and held the fine edge of insult. “Art some miserable mating animal then? And is that, perhaps, thy real and total purpose?”

“It is *not*. But you would not understand.”

I landed the small craft beneath the direction of the Great Vuun. We came to stony ground before a cave mouth of a full six hundred yards in width. Indeed, the ledge itself was a full two hundred yards from mouth to lip. I stepped to rock, damped out the ship and instantly moved toward the entrance. I was dressed lightly, though warmly in green shirt, padded jacket, and breeches and furred knee-boots. I wore my belt and sword and nothing else. I stood stock-still before moving.

“And now I must caution you,” I said strongly. “If any harm doth come to me from you, and I enter yonder great cave, you and all the dwindling handful of the life that you represent will rue it to your

last great stinking breath; for I tell you now that I bring you years of peace—and *that without me there is nothing.*”

“Enter the cave mouth, Man,” the Great Vuun answered, “and stop thy ‘mewling.’ As for the stink you mention, know you this and know it well: it is the smell of life to us; whereas tis *you* and the likes of *you* that brings the stench of flesh and carrion. . . Now, enough! Come to us and you will not be harmed.”

Despite my bluster I entered that cave with an understandable degree of trepidation. Again, I was encompassed with a ‘null’ magnetic field against the Kaleen. It would avail me little, however, if the Vuun and all its cohorts sought to squash me—one flick of a clawed talon and that would be that.

The clouds—snow-filled and grey, had been low outside, therefore the light within was meagre. I found a monstrous, seemingly endless hall whose dripping walls rose to a great ceiling beyond my sight in the semi-darkness. Its depths disappeared before me in like manner.

To the left and to the right, at one hundred yards within the entrance, were raised platforms of some semi-translucent and softened substance. They were as great green and glowing pillows. Upon each of these there was a Vuun. They rested, great leathern wings folded along the length of ghostly, mottled bodies; necks hunched back

uponslate-grey, bone-slick shoulders, and head lying forward on a breast that resembled nothing less than a giant kettledrum. The eyes were what I was drawn to: They were red with green pupils, saucer-sized, cold, completely detached. They were half-lidded, with the leathern membranous lids coming up from the bottom. And they seemed to slumber, to be unseeing; uncaring. I hesitated to eye them briefly, to right and left. Then I continued on. I passed in the space of minutes—and, indeed, I seemingly walked for many a city block—a number of great niches, passageways, from which came the great orange-red-purple glow of far volcanic fires. The Vuuns had created these passageways I knew, for even they liked not a total darkness. And then, in the distance, what had been but a blue-green glow came finally alive in definition. Nine great green and glowing pillows before a raised dais; equal to it in height. And beyond them, for they were centered in the great room, were the entrances to other passageways, each Vuun-sized, like subways of antiquity. Around the periphery of the dais, and in a perfect arc, was a small stream cut from the very rock itself through which ran heated, green, and phosphorescent water. I instantly assumed that this was also of volcanic origin. The temperature within the cave had risen considerably, though it was not at all uncomfortable.

I continued on, even unto the

great dais, upon which I vaulted for there were no steps. Of the nine pads, but three were occupied. And, though the resting Vuuns seemed of a similarity to those at the gates, still there was a difference. The great red eyes were not lidded; but rather, gazed straight at me with the death-like stare of some trio of monstrous reptilian *Lazarae* . . .

I placed my hands upon my hips and stared them back, from one to the other, albeit all were alike to me.

"And now," the same great voice probed my mind, "you are here. And you will give us the simple reason why we should not kill you."

"That I will most assuredly do, my most gracious trio of snag-toothed horrors," I said bluntly. "But first, the two we spoke of. I would see them, here and now."

"Then you are, indeed, but a mating animal."

I frowned and paused, then mentally said in icy tones to equal theirs: "Keep you those stupid thoughts inside your lizard heads, for I have no need of them at all. Let us now recognize that we are alien, one to the other; that we are alien, *but of the same galaxy*. I think that if we do this we will soon see that we still have more in common than with that blasphemous thing of Hish—before which *you*, apparently, *now scrape and bow*."

The center Vuun—his eyes blazed briefly more scarlet, and I thought that twas from him the thoughts

came — said bluntly, ignoring my gibes: "You speak of 'galaxies,' Man, What know you of galaxies?"

"As much as you or more. And therefore am I here—Now where are the two?"

"They come."

And I waited. And apparently 'they' had been already coming, for within minutes a metal ribbed boat stretched with oiled and sewn skins appeared upon the artificial stream. In it were Murie and Caroween, and two men, guards, by their appearance. At sight of them I drew my sword. If the Vuuns had ought to say of this they let it pass. They simply glared with baleful eyes.

The stream passed to within but two hundred yards of the dais. The boat halted. The two guards lashed it to a knobbed protuberance. They then shoved the two girls in the direction of the dais, at whose proximity they lifted them and placed them on it, and followed thus themselves. The dais was a goodly one hundred and fifty feet across. Just right for audience of a Great Vuun. For a man it was the width of a soccer field. . .

Murie looked great! She looked just great! Her petite ninety-eight pounds was dressed in a green velvet undersuit from which she had long since stripped her small-link armor. Her purple eyes sparkled with a glitter for me alone. I knew and I loved it. . . Her surcoat, jupon, had been quite bloodied, as I remembered it.

It now, like her page-boy bob and beaming face, had been well

scrubbed. Caroween, other than her red hair and heather attire, was Murie's image; for they were both of a similar size and shape.

The light in that damned cave was certainly not sufficient to spell me out. But the very arrogance of my posture had told them who I was for they liferally ran to me. They ran to me and I took both of them. I could not have denied Caroween the presence of Rawl, and to her, that's who I was. And Murie would not have had it otherwise. So with one hand still grasping sword, mine arms were filled with sweet-smelling, giggling, half-crying and and therefore sniffing, female flesh — the best all Camelot had to offer; a red-head and a blonde against either shoulder — Aye! That I should drop dead in just such a situation . . . I stared beyond their dainty top-knots to the red eyes of the three great Vuuns, daring them to think one stupid thought. They were impassive. And for my grasping they seemed not to care a Terran fig. Then I bethought me of the two guards who had accompanied them. I gently pushed Muric and Caroween to one side.

They were two hulking brutes in leather harness with small sword. They wore nothing else. They looked at me doltishly; though there was something of awe in their stares too.

"Are you of Om?" I asked softly. "Tell me just yea or nay."

One of them said gruffly, his

eyes wavering: "What is Om?"

I said nothing in reply, just shook my head. I looked keenly at the three Vuuns, and returned my sword to its sheath. *They knew nothing of Om*, and that itself was interesting. If they had, I would have killed them both, and instantly, for I would not trust the Vuuns to maintain my presence secret other than through themselves.

"Stand ye back," I said then harshly to those shuffling oafs, "Stand ye back by yon edge of this platform and do not come near us again unless I call you."

They looked to the Vuun and seemingly found nothing to contradict me, so they left us.

And then I kissed Murie, holding her tightly and still holding Caroween. When I drew away for breath she managed to choke out: "Hey, now, M'Lord? At first I thought you o'er long in coming — and now it seems but seconds."

"And did you doubt my coming?"

"Not for a breath."

I kissed her again and she asked pertly, "Now how will you deal with yon great buzzards so as to free us?"

"I'll manage," I said.

I turned to Caroween then and kissed her too, though on her comely cheek and not with passion. "I have seen your knight," I told her. "And this but short hours ago. He is well. He goes to Reen in Ferlach, and thence to a great plain called

Dunguring some miles from Corchoon, the capital of Kelb."

"Does my Lord know of my circumstances?"

"Indeed, for I have told him."

"Then why, Sir, is he not here with you?"

"Forsooth, because I would not let him come, M'Lady."

"Well now, indeed, M'Lord," the girl began most angrily, but Murie spoke up sharply, saying, "Cari! Do not fault my Lord when he is here to take us from the talloned grasp of yon great potpies. Look to your reason!"

Upon this my red-head burst into tears, kissed my cheek quickly again, then buried her head in my shoulder. At this last I detected a faintly raised eyebrow from my 'gentle' Murie Nigaard, and I patted Caroween's head for exactly three seconds and let her go. Then I held Murie tightly again, feeling the length of her soft body, since neither of us wore but simple clothes. I brushed her lips and eyes and pert nose with mine. I even managed to nibble a pointy ear, all in defiance, I think, of those three great Vuuns.

I then said: "I ask now, Murie, that you give me your silence, your respect, and all your confidence. For I will converse with those Vuuns and you will not hear of what we say. And there is no time now to explain. With luck there will be forever later . . ."

Murie stared at me with those great purple eyes, then she touched

my chest with daintly lingering fingertips. "I do not know what you are, or who, or from where, my own Lord —" she said, "except I know that you be here with me. Now say your say to those great monsters, and I am your true right arm."

Murie then stepped to Caroween. And they stood with arms about each other, as I deemed they had often done these three most fearful days and nights from Goolbie's Keep. I advanced three paces toward the edge of the dais and faced the great Vuuns. I placed my hands on my hips and sent an enlivening mental charge across that space that I knew was pure shock to them. . . . "And now," I said, "we will begin our parlay. . . ."

"Indeed!" The icy thought came back to me. "Hast finally done with your obscene writhings and chucklings and sickening rubbings, which to our eyes are cause for reflex horror?"

"Have done," I said softly. "There is no need."

"Have done indeed! You miserable mating animal! Have done completely. And touch not again, in our presence, those ghastly, maggoty, facsimiles of yourself. For if you do, we shall terminate this talk *and you — and instantly!* Now tell us of *galaxies* and delay no longer."

And I told them. I told them of Fomalhaut, and of Fomalhaut II,

and of the twin stars with their twin systems; and of these systems' total place in our total galaxy; and of the galaxies of our universe. And through it all it was as if a great and turgid silence reigned inside their monstrous horned heads. And finally, when I was through, the great center Vuun — and somehow I gathered he had a name and it was Ap — said bluntly, "So we have thought it to be, Man-thing. Across the centuries we have discussed it, and our conclusions, though not precise in fact, are in theory substantiated by all you say."

"You have arrived at this knowledge by pure reason?"

"We have had the time for it, Man-thing."

"How long, then, is your life span?"

"A thousand Fomalhaut years."

"Then how long, exactly, since the arrival of the 'men' from that far, 'other' world — for you would know."

"Five thousand years and a score. And that is their brief history. There were twelve great ships; each with a thousand man-things; and some came here, to this great world south of the River-Sea. The others landed in the North-land. And they were all as children then, knowing nothing of their past or of the intricacies of their carriers. And one would think them all to die. But 'twas not so, for in this short time — since their race memory did prevail — they created gods and cities

wherein to dwell and kings to rule and serfs to serve, so that now, though still few, they range the two great continents. And we who breed but slowly, and sometimes not at all for we are not as you, and having no desires, with the coming of knowledge, we have little to do but watch, and wait our death."

"There were only man-things aboard those ships — no other life?"

"None but that which lies in Hish."

"Then all life here?"

"Is as it was. We are the dominants; next come dottles, gerds, fixls, and like ruminants, and so on down the line."

"And Great Yorns?"

"They, too, are Man-things, though different, for they are diseased of their planet's holocaust. They were from one ship which landed in our median-tropid-upland zones."

"And Pug-Boos?"

"Tender leaf-eaters of special trees, here, in our south-land. And if the trees do not leaf in proper time, the Pug-Boos simply wait and stare, and stare and starve, and finally fall down to the ground."

"They are that stupid?"

"They *are* that stupid."

"What 'of the ecological balance? Are there no carnivores?"

(I generally knew the answer to that. But my desire was to place the Vuun; therefore the question.)

"There are sufficient to do that job. And they are of many kinds, those meat-eaters. They range both continents."

"And you?" I dared ask the question. "Are you meat-eaters?"

Again the icy calm of contemplation, and then the words: "Think on it, Man. Were we carnivorous with our great size, life as you know it now would long since have vanished from this fecund world. We feed upon the flora of the sea. And we are at peace with *all* life."

"I have heard otherwise."

"In the beginning we did attack those from the ships, thinking them of a great and perilous danger. When we found differently, we let them be."

"And those of the guards who brought my companions here?"

"They are *our-men*; from another single ship of the twelve. They serve us."

"Indeed," I said.

"Indeed," Ap answered.

"And now," I said, "we will come to our point. And, in lieu of prattle and dissimulation I will simply tell you that *which is*, for I think I know you now. And though we do be alien, one to the other, it is as I said before — that there is more 'twixt us than there is 'twixt you and that *thing* that lies in rocky Hishian bowels — that which calls itself the Kaleen."

"Correction, Man-thing. *It* calls itself nothing. It is you and yours

which have given it the name, Kaleen."

"So be it. To what end have you made pact with it, so that you go against the 'men' of the northlands, and thereby with their defeat enhance *its* power?"

"This Kaleen, as you know it, is not warlike. It lies instead quiescent, except when Man-things go beyond their status-quo, and seek to build; to *know*; to advance themselves to the level of what they were when first they came. For us, too, this growth of Man-things cannot be; for if it happen, then in all this world there will be no place for Vuuns. We are few now — less than five hundred. We have no great love of life, but while we live and while a spark of interest yet remains, we would be at peace and not be driven. We would think our thoughts and know our soil, our sky, and our great seas: we would not have our world to change."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"Great Ap," I said. "Know this and know it well. In all our shared galaxy; nay, in all our monstrous universe there are ten thousand times ten thousand worlds like this one. And some are virgin, jungle, and great forests; whilst some teem with life and others do not. *And there are worlds upon which there are those akin to you.* And finally, in some far future, *this world will change.* There is nothing you, or any life, can do about it. Certainly

the *thing* of Hist will not prevent that change; indeed, it fosters and abets it — but for its own ends.”

And then I told them what the Pug-Boos had told me, leaving nothing out but that the information came from a source other than my Foundation. “And look you,” I said finally. “The control of this planet, which the *thing* of Hist plans for itself — and this a control of *all* life here, including yours — this very act creates the circumstances for change. ‘It’ has given the men of Om a magick power — though as told to you — the power is of logic and not of magic. This power has extended to beyond Om all the lands of the Northern World, so that it is now taught in collegiums as a practical course. Think you not that each succeeding generation of men will not question further the real source of this power? And think you not that sooner or later they will find the true source? When that is done, well then, indeed, will men rise to the glory of their past, and all that is will change.

“So be it! Logic tells us that one of two things will therefore happen. The one: Om and the ‘Kaleen’ will prevail, meaning that the force of Hist will dominate the length and breadth of all this planet — including *you*, to and end of we know not what. The second: That Om, and the ‘kaleen’ for the moment, will lose, meaning that if the *force* continues to be held in check, this planet will then come under the domination of

a greater race of men; the difference being that, unlike the Kaleen, they will not threaten *you*. Indeed, we now, of the Foundation, and they later, be you still here, are prepared to offer you the stars, and a companionship kin to yourselves, which without us you could never know. Think well on that, and think well *now* — for the hours pass. I will give you time for council. And I will await your answer.”

I stepped back my three paces to rejoin Murie and Caroween.

“We have heard nought but a great silence, M’Lord,” Murie said. “Has there been converse?”

“Aye, there has, my elfin lady,” I replied. “But it is a thing of the mind such as dreams are made of; though clearer pictured so all is understood. Now tell me, how was it with you these three long days?”

Murie moved toward me but I held up my hand. “Nay,” I said. “Stay where thou art my true love for but some minutes yet. We must not disturb yon sensitive horrors with our petty pats and ‘rubbings’. They deem it unseemly.

Murie’s mouth was a perfect ‘O’ of absolute surprise and indignation — “Do they, indeed, M’Lord,” she began, her voice rising.

“Nay, nay,” I said again. “Softly, for they are conversing, and I have asked their aid — now tell me of your travail.”

She looked at me steadily then, and I smiled and blew her a mascu-

line kiss from where I stood, and she sighed and said finally, "Well, M'Lord, along that waterway and through those great cave halls there is a world of stone and people and houses and fields where strange vegetables are grown. At one point there is a great round valley open to the sky with a mountain on all sides (I knew by this that she meant the burnt out inner base of the cone of a volcano). Upon this black soil more things are grown. And there is a lake in its center from which this very water comes. There we were kept, Caroween and I, in a great house not unlike those of our Glagmaron City. . . The people of this Vuunland know nought of the world outside, and seem to care not. They are content here and go about their business with no complaint."

"But do they not resent their slavery to yon Vuuns?"

"In sooth, no! For they do not deem it slavery. They make the resting pillows you see which are of a strange material and hold the heated water from the lake so that the Vuuns rest warm. They bathe the Vuuns betimes with great brush and giant scraper. Also, they grow a certain pepper delicacy which the Vuuns do greatly love. Other than that, nothing. They look upon the Vuuns as their protectors from all the 'horror' that is without the mountain chain. And that is that."

"We sought to tell them of ourselves," Caroween put in. "But, in

sooth, they were hardly interested. We let them be."

"What of the Prince of Kelb," I asked them slowly. "You were slated, my dear, for his bed and board, and not for Vuunland."

Murie smiled: "We too," she said, "were witness to this thing you speak of as dream-pictures, for after we left you and our strength came back to us — though twas sore cold in the high air where that great monster flew us — the pictures came. They were directed to that evil Prince and his remaining warriors who clung here and there upon the great net. They said most clearly that only the prince and his men would be given to leave when the great dragon came to light in Kelb. The black-browed prince did cry and moan then, but the Vuun said nothing more. And when the prince saw that I and Caroween were indeed to life again he threatened me and tried to mount the netting all round the great Vuun's body so as to reach me with a fal-dirk. And I called him coward and base dog, as did Caroween. But he came on. And it was then that the great Vuun's head, its saucer-eyes all ablaze, turned round and darted round on its long and ugly neck, so that the prince retreated tailwards, all white and sore afraid."

"We came aground in darkness and left the same way. And so it was. The next morn we were here, in Vuunland — *ignored, and waiting for my Lord.*"

Six thousand miles, I thought, and in a dozen hours. Great Ormon. I had judged them right. . .

"Dost fancy Vuun flight, my dearest honey-pot?" I asked, grinning.

"Were it not forced, and were I free of the smell, it could be interesting."

"It may well be," I cautioned, "that you will return the way you came. . ."

"And not with my Lord?" Great tears welled then from Murie's eyes, and I was hard put not to join her since she had the power, the singular proclivity, to evoke a like emotion in me.

"It may be that way," I continued. "But fear not, for you will land within your father's very camp. And you will know not of the trip and its discomforts and great danger. And mark you, *on that very day I will join you*; as will Sir Rawl, Charney, Griswall, and all your knights and men — and list me, both of you: on that very day too will we fight a battle such as our world will talk about for all time. And then," I said softly to Murie alone, "will you truly be my shield-maiden, and that too — for all time."

They had listened starry-eyed, an amalgam of wonder and tears. And Murie opened her mouth to speak again, but the Vuun's thought came strong and insistent, and I raised my hand to Murie for her silence and took my three paces for-

ward.

"Hey! Man!" The voice rang icily, harshly, in my ears. . . "We have conferred. And other than our answer, I would tell you that there is one of us that knows you of the snow-mountains to the north. He that brought those two man-creatures here — he says of you that you are a killer of life and a thing of nightmares. Yet despite this, we will trust you, for we have probed your mind and found you without guile. What you have said, though there be things still hidden from us, are true.

Therefore will we desist in all aid of the *thing* of Hish: rather we will await the end of this battle and a further contact with you."

"We welcome your decision," I said courteously. "But know you this, for you have lived too long in 'splendid' isolation: all life remains what it is, a thing of struggle, a thing of change; the formula advanced a millenium ago: that you are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem, holds true today; here, now, on Camelot-Flegis. Therefore, I caution you: *there is no neutral ground*. And if you do not do what you have agreed upon with the *thing* in Hish, it will do something to you!"

"O'er us it has no power," Ap said simply. "We have long known of magnetic fields and their simple cancellation — such as that which you use now. The *thing* knows we know, and can do nothing. It is

still too weak. We had allied ourselves with it for the reasons that we told you, and because we know that our abilities to create null magnetism may protect us now and for the moment from the *thing*, yet in the long run, this would not be true of those developing powers of man."

"Well put," I said. "But other than your seizure of the Princess of Marack — this facsimile of a Man-thing, as you call her — how else would you have aided Om?"

"Ten of us were to appear over that great field of battle where we would then terrorize your thousands with our presence."

"Om counts on this appearance?"

"Aye!"

"When?"

"Since armies are gathered — and still gathering — we have been informed that the time will be soon."

"How are you so informed?"

"In the same manner whereby we converse with you."

"There is no danger, then, that the Kaleen will know of me through you?"

"None. For we, ourselves, control our thoughts and entry."

"Then, though I have said there is no neutral ground, your participation could still be limited. I would ask but one thing: that on the day of battle but a single Vuun will land within the center of Marack's forces and there deposit yon Princess, Murie Nigaard, and her companion the Lady Caroween. . .

Then all upon that great field will see and know that great Vuuns are *not* allied with Om."

"And if we do not as you say, Man-Thing?"

"Well then, nothing. I will simply take these two of ours with me now; the battle shall be fought without you — and, if it be lost — as well it may anyway — then you, in part, will share the blame. And all that could have been will be as nought. The *thing* of Hish will win the day. I ask that you think on that, and what it means for you. That which we ask is simple-small."

"Tis more than simple-small. It is alliance."

"You risk nothing now, since the Kaleen cannot harm you now. . ."

"And if you still lose?"

"By Great Ormon!" I mentally screamed at them. "Know you that on that field tomorrow, and all the days until the end, one hundred times a thousand men will give their lives in battle against Om. . . And, if we be in the right, those men-things will have also died for you? Hast never heard of areas of agreement for mutual gain; of positive unities of opposites? Think what you will, your future lies with us and not with the *thing* of Om and the dark universe beyond the gate of which we know nought of. . . SO SAY YOU NOW. WHAT WILL YOU DO? FOR IN SOOTH YOU TRY MY PATIENCE SORELY!"

I stood with folded arms and

steely glare and held those six great blazing, saucered-eyes as if in thrall. The silence mounted, bled off to every nook and passageway from that great dais. And somehow they communicated with each other; not just the three, but with the whole five hundred.

Ap spoke to me. "Man-thing," he said. "Your logic does your courage justice, for you are right in what you say. I myself will go to that plain you have described beyond the Kelbian city of Corchoon. But, and I not be feathered with ten thousand arrows, just how will you protect me?"

"Yon maid," I said, taking a certain license with the word, "will fly her colors from your back; the colors of her father, King Caronne, and thus will you be safe."

"It will be done."

"Then, Great Ap, when you are done, retire to here and on some future date we will meet again, if that is your desire, and speak again of galaxies and the others of your kind in this great universe of ours. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Man-thing. You have now our permission to leave."

"I will say first, Great Ap, a goodbye to my friends."

"So be it."

And then, as if the sight of my 'goodbyes' would be too much for them, the membranous lids of their great eyes flicked up and over so that only the faintest of red showed through

"Tis done," I said to Murie. "I leave you now. But first for you and Caroween there is still a thing that I must do."

"And what is that, 'Lord?'"

"I would that you did not suffer the long flight through the cold and the night. And I will, with permission from you both, prepare you for it."

"How so, M'Lord?"

I stepped to her and drew her to me, and beckoned Caroween to join us. I first kissed Murie, put my cheek against hers for the space of seconds, and then pulled back. "I want you both," I told them, "to watch my eyes and nothing else, and to listen to my voice." They did so. And within seconds, according to my powers, they were in deep hypnosis.

I told them then what they were to do: That they would not fear the flight; that all they remembered of me in this hall would be swept from their minds; but that with Murie, the faintest of memories would linger so that she would know that it was because of me that this had happened. One thought I implanted deeply for post-hypnotic action: Murie was to tell her father—if she arrived at Dunguring before I did, and if he doubted that which he would hear from Draslich and Chitar—that I would come on the final day of battle with all of Fon-Tweel's 30,000.

And that was that.

I walked them to the edge of the

dais, my arms close round them. I walked them, too, to the cockleshell boat, and helped them enter. Before that, of course, I held Murie tight once again, and kissed her and told her that I would see her very soon.

And, as stated: that was that.

The boat moved off into the passageway where it disappeared. I then turned toward the three Great Vuuns, saw that their eyes were open, and bowed respectfully in their direction. "Until that time, Great Ap," I said.

Great Ap said nothing. And I walked back down that half-mile length of mighty hall to the massive entrance with its Vuun guardians. I nodded to them too, but they ignored me. It was snowing now so that all was a swirl of white before my eyes. I advanced a few feet, gave the numbers that phased in the star-ship, and continued cautiously, wary of the edge of the precipice, until I could feel the ship with my hands.

Once inside I shot straight up from that snow-blanketed ledge so that again the greater part of the southern continent of Camelot-Flegis lay below me North then, and across those trackless jungles and the River-Sea. I hovered thrice. The first time over Dunguring to watch the gathering hosts. The greater part of the Omnian-Kerchian-Seligian armada had landed and the fields and roads inland from Corchoon were packed with hordes of marching sol-

diery. The Marackian army remained still at 20,000. They had yet to be joined by Hoggle-Fitz. I would have stopped had I the time to make contact, to tell Caronne and the Lord, Per-Rondin, that help was coming. Then to Glagmaron. All was as the previous day. No single tent struck; no charge of dottles to the west.

On the great south road from Ferlach and Gheese, there streamed a dottle horde such as few men have seen: three-abreast for a full thirty miles, a flowing wash of color in the proudly displayed banners and pennons of Ferlach and Gheese. Forty thousand men—three dottles per rider; one hundred and twenty thousand dottles. The very earth shuddered to their million pounding paws. The sight was as a flowing river of gray lava, mottled with white and black and buff. . . And it was beautiful.

Then to my last stop, the mountain road that crossed the southern sea-plain to the Port City of Reen. I had directed Rawl to go to Reen because I had no desire to appear twice before the hordes of Chitar and Drasiich. . . Now he travelled with but ten student-warriors.

I followed the road down from the battlefield of the riverbank to where I spotted their group some miles before the pass that led down to the sea. As before, I dropped down to a shaded spot, damped out the ship, and moved to the road and

waited. Again I slept on a grassy hummock overlooking the path. For again I had time. It was high-noon. It would take Rawl and his ten at least three hours to reach me. The road to the north from my hummock, was straight for a good two miles. It crossed two small streams and a series of gog-meadows. I awoke with minutes to spare and lazed luxuriously, listening to the strident voices of quarreling tuckle-birds, and the sweet warble of something in fluffy beige and purple feathers. I had been joined, too, by two small dubots. They sat on a log and nibbled ipy nuts and discussed me raucously.

And then, as predictable as Fom-alhaut in orbit, there came Rawl. I slid down the fifteen feet of grassy knoll, stood in mid-road and held up my hand.

They were eleven riders and thirty-three dottles. Rawl was shaking his head for the last 100 yards, knowing full-well who it was. "Sir Lenti, Sir Collin," he said lightly. "What now, Sir Sorcerer? I wot that I shall meet you on every road on Flegis. Hast changed thy plans?"

"Nay, Sir Fergis," I grinned. "I have but come to change yours."

"My Lord," he exploded. "Not again?"

"Gather ye round," I said to all of them.

Then I explained what was to be, and that their chief would go with me, while they would continue to

Reen to help cement the needed unity amongst the ships of Marack, Ferlach, and Gheese. Our ten brave valients groaned at this, whilst I never saw a man more happy to give up his 'command' than Rawl. "Take your armor," I cautioned, for he was dressed as light as I though all his men wore link-mail.

Then we stood together in mid-road while our gallants, banished, as they saw it, to banal tasks while others rode to glory, nevertheless managed each a handshake as they rode us by.

"What now, oh mighty Collin?" Rawl asked, grinning, when we were alone. "Here we stand with my gear beside me upon the ground, and neither dottle, gerd, nor gog-pet for our transport. . . I await, Sir," and he gave a most respective bow, "your magick!"

"First the magick of your strong back," I said. "Pick up that mess of pot-metal and follow me."

He did, and we struggled back up the hummock, down its far side and into the little clearing where I had left the ship. I phased it in, called on its port to open and bade Rawl enter.

I sat him down in my contour's twin, ordered up food and bade him eat. "Say not a word," I said, as we both munched hungrily from the tray of offered goodies. "Say not a word, my friend. For come tomorrow you will remember nought of this, save that by sorcery you trav-

eled with me from Ferlach to far Glagmaron, and all in the space of hours."

"Why not remember?" he asked. "Twould be a pleasant tale for my old age."

"We'll see," I said. "But for the moment, believe me, tis a needed thing that no one know ought of me or how I do what is done. . .Some day," I said. . . "Some day."

"Some day, indeed," he echoed me.

And now would be the last step before Glagmaron and the moving of Fon-Tweel's host to the field of Dunguring. It was my intent to zap the Lord, Fon-Tweel, this very night, and to put Rawl, Griswall, and Charney in command of the thirty thousand for the six-hundred mile dottle-dash to the aid of Marack and the north. I would not make that trip. I would do one last flight of the star-ship and thereby arrive fresh for the denouement to this massive, alien web of plan and plot.

We rose then, straight up, for a full two hundred miles. And I bade Rawl—since he would lose all memory of it anyway—to look his fill at 'the fairest planet of them all'. He did, then back to me and said: "And I would fight you, Collin, for the privilege of a memory."

"Nay!" I said. "Nay!" And I felt like an utter bastard before the justice of his thoughts. . . "Some day, as stated. *I promise you!*"

We cut back down then, through

Flegis's atmosphere to Glagmaron, and I asked Rawl to don his armor, stating that when next he blinked his eyes he would be at the spot where he first met me.

He looked at me strangely then. "I should," he said, "fight you anyway, Sir Lenti. For it is not sooth that such as I, or such as we all, should be played upon by you. We seem to be as puppets to your hand. You say you will take my memory. You appear here and there, and always in battle—or the preparation thereof—so that all my world is now in perilous confrontation with the hell of Om and the black Kaleen. Yet how know I, really, that this is not all a thing of yours, and yours alone?"

"You don't," I said gruffly. "But I think you have seen sufficient to know that it is not." And then I said a thing to him which, had the Boos or the Foundation overheard me, would no doubt have found me blasted instantly, and flatly on the spot. "Rawl," I said strongly. "I promise you— and this promise will *not* be taken from your memory: There will be two people so informed of who I am and what I do when this is over. You will be one of them: Murie Nigaard is the other. Trust me until that time. You will never regret that trust."

He nodded slowly and looked away. And that, I knew, was all the answer I would ever get.

Then he was in full armor, and I caught his eyes and held them, and

worked my little game so that shortly he was stretched out prone upon the star-ship's tiny deck.

I landed in the clearing, hauled the supine figure of Rawl—armor and all—through the door and out upon the greensward. And I trundled him beyond to the ring of sleepers, Charney, Griswall, Hargis, and the student, Tober. Then back to the ship where I arrayed myself in all my battle splendour—padded underdress, link-armor, helm, great shield with my colors of gold and violet, broadsword and sundry small weapons, and my surcoat, now cleaned and laundered by the ship's appointments. We would be a splendid crew indeed, I thought, when we rode forth to the great camp of Fontweel's thirty thousand.

Dusk was fast approaching when I stepped outside to the green of hummock and swale. The very moment my foot touched ground, and as I closed the port of the star-ship, it faded to phased invisibility. Simultaneously with this the node at the base of my skull signalled a Greenwich 'alarm'. I switched on. "In," I said. "What's this with my ship?"

"It's yours now only if you promise to re-enter and leave Camelot. You've had it, Sir Collin!" The voice was Kriloy's. "You've broken every Foundation law in the book. We've been scanning you, Baby. If it were not for the fact that a case like this warrants a decision from headquarters, we would have

cancelled you out on our own. . . For God's sake, Kyrie, you've got to be off your rocker."

"I take it," I said bluntly, "that you're not restricting yourselves to the agreed two minutes either; that you're risking a helluva lot just to sink the shaft into me."

"We're risking? That did it, Baby." Ragen was talking now. "You've risked everything, not us. We know there's a connection between the destruction on Alpha and the little game your Pug-Boos are playing with their opposite in 'goodness' down in that pile of stones called Hish. We know too that the Vuuns have a personal claw in the pie. But this is their planet! You of all people should know that. You were sent here to check things out; to exert whatever influence you could, and to keep us absolutely informed as to what was happening. And what have you done? One: Your data on the tape wasn't. Two: Against orders you've played games with the star-ship. Three: You have done the above because—from the way we've psyched it—somewhere along the line you've actually begun to fancy yourself as the 'mythos-incarnate' of these people's folk-hero *The Collin*. You were supposed to hint at it, not jump into the role with both feet. But there you are. The Great Collin, returned in all his splendour. His armor glows in the dark. He is the match of any ten Flegisians. And, he's already won and bedded the fair Princess of the

threatened kingdom—and thereby carved himself a niche in this somewhat backward economy. You *like* the role, don't you? You *really like it!*... Our position, Buby, is that the moment you saw that blonde-furred little purple-eyed pixie in the scanners, you had a case of 'instant brain boggle'. Every last bit of Foundation procedure, discipline, and theory went right down the proverbial drain. You've come a cropper, *Collin!* You've had it! It's back to school for you, and NOW! So wave goodbye to your five sleeping beauties, strip off that armor, and get your whatnot into that ship and **BLAST OFF!**"

"You've got it wrong," I said softly. It was the first time I had a chance to get a word in.

"No more talk, Kyrie. Into the ship."

"Un unh!"

"There are penalties."

"I know. There are things here, however, about which I know and you don't."

"Then tell us," Ragen said coldly.

"Can't."

"You *can't*? The Foundation, Kyrie, is the heart of all Galactic knowledge; the conglomerate of all the intelligence of life. Decisions pertaining to the protection of that life are made by the 'collective'; the computers. The knowledge of ten thousand years, and of ten thousand planets exist in those computers; all programmed; all at our beck and call—sufficient, Kyrie, to handle

any problem. And *you're* not going to tell us what the problem is, because *you can't!*" Ragen drew a deep breath and repeated: "*Get into the ship, Kyrie.*"

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not leaving. There's a battle shaping up to which you'll have a ring-side seat—though I'd advise you to get the double-damned hell out of here because, I repeat, your presence still creates a peril for Camelot. Anyhow. Contact me after it's over. Better yet, *I'll call you.* I say that because unless I've had a chat with the Boos again—after we've won—I'll still be in the dark and so will you. So leave it at that. There are things in motion which you cannot effect or change. We may be able to do something about them after the battle, but not now. So, as stated, I'll call you. . . Right now, children, I'm going to ask once more that you get the bloody-hell out of this system until the battle is over. You can't help. You can only hinder. And, I might add—*you're out of your league.* From where I sit I think we all are—but they ain't nuthin we can do about it but take our chances."

"That's your last word?"

"It's not only my last word," I said. "But I'm not going to wait for your ritual snapping of the umbilical cord. . . I'm snapping it! Me! And right now!" And I did. And because I'm essentially the sneaky type, I snapped it right back on again, in time to hear Ragen say to Kriloy: "He's flipped. Our *Collin's*

flipped. All right! Call forward. Get out as he requested. That's the least we can do. But so help me. . ." Then they cut me off.

I pressed the ship stud and said the phasing in numbers; nothing! They had effectively loused that up for me. So be it! I would have to go that full six-hundred miles with Glagmaron's finest, by dottle-back. The idea made me physically ill.

So be it, again! There was work to be done.

One by one I awakened them, then gathered them all about me for a briefing. I pulled no punches. I told Griswall, Charney, Hargis, and Tober where I had been and what I had been doing. Rawl's presence, in part, underlined the truth of my words. The only thing I didn't tell them was how I had been to all those places. About the Great Vuuns, I was deliberately vague, explaining only that I had convinced them to renig on their pact with Om, and to return the Princess and Caroween to our armies on the field of Dunguring.

"And now my lord, Griswall said softly—and after Rawl had thanked them all profusely for their fight for his lady—I take it that we ride back to Fon-Tweel, dispench with him, secure the army, and ride for Dunguring?"

"You take it right."

Rawl stood up then to his full height. He looked first the others, and then me straight in the eye.

"Now listen all," he said. "And you too, Collin. For though I do love you, there is a thing that you must know. I say *you*, for though you say you are of Marack, and therefore Flegis, there are things of protocol that you do oft forget—" He smiled. "It is as if you never really knew them. Anyhow, my words are these: My father, the Lord Cagis Rawl, is brother to our Queen, Tyn-dil. I am blood-cousin to our Princess. There are no sons to the line of Caronne. And though the Collin, here, become Prince-Consort by marriage with our Princess, still I and no one else, as of this moment—and since to date there are no offspring of the Collin's joining—do represent the Royal House in Glagmaron. What I say, Collin, is simple. *I* and not *you* shall slay the traitor, Fon-Tweel. It is my right—an een my duty."

I looked to the others who had followed Rawl's words with rapt attention. They nodded, Aye.

"It is," I said reluctantly, "that I would bring you whole unto your Lady, Caroween."

"Hey, now! Collin? Dost think I am some pewling snotnose? Me-thinks you go to far, Sir."

"Nay! Nay!" I held up a hand in mock fear. "I love you too, Sir. But you must admit that a red-head, Cari-Hoggle-Fitz, is something to contend with. I want not her anger, sith you not show up at Dunguring. Still, you are right in this argument, and none here, inclusive of myself,

doubt that within the hour you shall sweep Fon-Tweel's head from his traitorous body. Now let us whistle our dottles and be off."

Tober whistled, while Charney and Hargis and Griswall beamed at young Rawl Fergis. . . And the dottles came, among them being Henery; and among them, too, a thing I had not counted on. On the backs of half the ten were *five Pug-Boos*. Hooli, Jindil, Pawbi, and—I reasoned instantly, the two lost Boos from Kelb and Great Ortmund. The eyes of my five stalwarts lit up like lasers in their welcoming joy. And they cast lots to see who would be the one who would ride without a Boo, since Hooli sat on Henerey's rump and no one questioned that.

Hargis, Charney's brother, lost. And he was Booleless as we thundered up the great road in the direction of the camp of Fon-Tweel's 30,000.

To say that I felt somewhat oppressed by this sudden weight of Pug-Boos, would be the understatement of the Flegisian week. That the little bastards were up to something, I didn't doubt for an instant. Was I glad they had joined us? I had mixed emotions. A certain safety existed in the presence of Boos. But this too could be a chimera of wishful-thinking. I tried opening my mind to Pug-Boo thoughts. Nothing happened. The little bastards—the double-damned little bastards. . .

They were good for one thing.

LET THERE BE MAGICK!

The weight of their presence, plus my own, plus our students, plus Griswall, served to clear a path all the way to the entrance of Fon-Tweel's tent; served, too, to lend credence to Sir Rawl's challenge when he denounced Fon-Tweel as a traitor to Marack, and to all the lands of the north before that gathered chivalry of Glagmaron. It was Ferlach and Gheese all over again, with shouts of rage, support, cheers, and a half-hundred contradictory exclamations. But I think the cheers favored our side, for they had some faith in the presence of the old stalwart, Griswall—certainly in the Boos—even a little in me, though only my shield glowed now since I had put aside the trick of the ion beam. Fon-Tweel, perforce, and before all that mass of warriors, had no recourse but to comply with Rawl's challenge. For there were those present who had already questioned his lack of movement toward Ferlach and Gheese.

A spot was chosen between four fires at point. Additional torches—since it was now quite dark—were brought to light this square of turf. Since Rawl was the challenger, Fon-Tweel was given the choice of weapons. He chose that which he used best, the broadsword. He chose light armor too, thinking his strength superior so that he could abide Rawl's blows, whereas Rawl could never abide his. He had five stalwarts to back him. For other than his treason, and his loud mouth, he

was a personable fellow, capable of engendering friendships of a kind. From time to time I noted that Fon-Tweel looked about him, and up and around, as if he were expecting something or someone, and was surprised that 'it' had not shown up. I saw him muttering 'words', too. And the unhappy look on his face was most evident when they had no effect. Twas then I realized that those five fat Boos—who never went to war—were at it again. Fon-Tweel obviously enjoyed Kaleen support, otherwise he would never have played his game. He expected it now; was waiting for it in fact. But I knew it would never come. My boy, I said mentally, my five fuzzy Boos have stirred the ree-leaves with their pinkies. And you, Sir—*are strictly on your own.*

While it lasted they were evenly matched. Fon-Tweel's black-Browed mass was off-set by Rawl's lith and wiry suppleness. Rawl was all around him, hacking and chopping. Fon-Tweel's blows whistled with the steel-wind of control and power. Once, when Rawl lifted his Shield to protect his head, Fon-Tweel clove that shield to the area—had there been one—of the bar-sinister. Before he twisted free in eage, Rawl had sore wounded him with a smashing blow to mid-riff which cut through links to bite into the muscles of his rib cage. Then Fon-Tweel struck back, and the two of them became a flashing, spark-flying roaring duo

of arms and armor, from which Rawl finally fell back with his helm struck from his shoulders. Luck, I thought, that twas not his head. He was truly at a disadvantage then. And, had not Fon-Tweel made the mistake of slowly and confidently stalking him for the kill, he may have lost. But Fon-Tweel's purpose was so evident, and his own disadvantage so clear, that Rawl threw all caution to the winds. He dropped shield to ground, seized upon his great-sword with both hands—and charged. Some say he was exceeding foolish; others, that he was berserk! I would say simply that he had judged his man a'right, and knew his breaking point.

There then happened a thing contrary to all held dear on Camelot—and a thing, in fact, which *guaranteed* Fon-Tweel's death. Fon-Tweel, weakened in part by Rawl's first hacking blow, was not prepared for this howling, maddened rush, and blued-steel arc of whirling sword. He held for brief seconds only. Then he turned and ran. *He ran!* But he was tripped by a full half-dozen roaring warriors, so that he fell with a look of abject terror on his face; he knew he had committed the impermissible. They jerked his helm from his head; brought him to kneeling position, laced his hands behind his back with leather thongs, and waited in a great and awesome silence while Rawl struck his head from his body. The whole fight had lasted perhaps ten minutes.

Rawl returned to our group; tossed his bloodied sword to those who had rallied to our side, (if Rawl had lost we too would have been in grave danger) and received our earnest handclaps. Then he said simply to me: "Tis yours to do now, Collin." And I nodded and called for a table, had it mounted in the center of that grassy square where Fon-Tweel's headless body lay, and climbed upon it. I bade Rawl and all our stalwarts to ring me round.

I waited dramatically until the shouting and the bedlam died and the mass of lords, knights, men-at-arms, squires, archers, and camp provendors, moved in. I waited still again until the ensuing silence became something more than that: a deadness, a vacuum, a breathlessness in which all waited for something they now instinctively knew would strike home to their very hearts and marrow.

Then I raised my arms. "Comrades of Marack," I said. "*Friends!* All ye Lords and *Men* and Warriors! There is something that I would tell you. There is a thing of your world and that which comes against it from the foulest pits of *Best*. There is a thing that transcends all else in your lifetime. . . And there is a thing that you must do."

Behind me there began the faintest, the most delicate and the most beautiful sounds of music I have ever heard in my lifetime. And it seemed that to my words—but oh ever so faintly, so as not to intrude—

Hooli, the Pug-Boo was playing his pipe... . And so I told them. And the hypnotic, charismatic cadence of my voice, mixed with that subtle insidious, and totally encompassing melodious rythm of Hooli, was such that I doubt twill ever be heard again on Camelot. And we had an audience of thirty thousand. And I think when I remember it now that, considering the affinity of gentle dottles for Pug-Boos, and granting, too, their position within the culture, that we had thrice thirty thousand of these creatures to ring us round and to listen to the Pug-Boo's music. We were a great horde of *life*. And in our hands would be the future of this world.

And so I talked and the Pug-Boos played. And one by one the great stars came out in our black-saucered sky. And once, before I was through, small Riple flew across the night; as a comet, an omen, a red portent of things to come—and soon.

We started out in the gray dawn of the morrow. The towns-people and the castle-people lined the hills to see us go, for never had they seen anything quite like it. All that night we had mustered men and mounts for the journey. Scant sleep had been given anyone. The three Lords of Marack's southern provinces who had served under Fon-Tweel pledged themselves fully to Rawl. And it was understood that the entire force was now under our

joint-command. We would ride this day, tonight, and all of tomorrow. And on tomorrow's eve we would arrive at Dunguring. I frankly don't know which I dreaded more, the sight of a stricken field where all might be lost; or that damnable ride across six hundred miles of Flegisian terra-firma.

I managed a bit of self-hypnosis to help me survive it. Our only rest was during the four-hour dottle browsing periods. And, I would point out, this applied to the night as well. Recall that Camelot-Flegis had a twenty-six hour rotation period. Two browsing breaks of four and four left us with eighteen hours travel time, so that at twenty miles per hour we easily made our required mileage during the time allowed. Despite those 'rest' periods, the ride was still pure blasphemy to mortal flesh. As stated stamina was one thing, strength another. On the last stretch, at the end of our sixty-two hour run, the *Collin* was collapsed over his saddle, and cared not a fig whether school kept or not. I remember once, during the sweating humidity of that last afternoon—the clouds were gathering again and great thunder roared around the horizon—that a gentle paw was placed upon the small of my back, causing a surge of power up the length of my spinal column. I mumbled something to the effect of: "Quit showing off. The one thing you *can* do for me is to tell me what you and your fat-fanned

friends are up to. You'll not ride with me into battle, you know. I'm not going to have you on Henery's rump when the whistle blows, you hear?"

It was like talking to myself. I twisted to look at Hooli. Nothing had changed. He simply stared right back with his enigmatic shoe-button eyes and his nauseating grin. He was beginning to reach me.

The clouds were there but it wasn't raining. At the last stop—12:00 noon to 4:00 p.m.—we (our command group) had left one-half hour before the main body: this at my suggestion so that upon our arrival we would have time to see the lay of the land and apportion our thousands of warriors as they came up. In this way there would be no delay in decision, or confusion in the strengthening of this or that wing and whatever remained of the center. All this with the proviso that anything remained at all.

But it did. And it was a sight as I will never forget; nor will anyone else who sees its reproduction in the great *Ovarium* at Glagmaron's new art center.

Dunguring plain was five miles in width and ten miles long. Its eastern border consisted of a high ridge sloping sharply down to the plain. At places this ridge was actually a cliff a hundred feet in height. As the slopes flattened to the plain a number of small hills still jutted

to continue a domination of the plain by the ridge. Beyond these hills the ground was reasonably flat. A great part of it had been planted to a form of maize, and it was trisected by two small streams. One of these rivers entered the plain from the south-east, circling a great volcanic cone; the second entered from the north-west. They joined in the center and then flowed north-east below the base of another volcano, and thence to the sea. The 'great road', I noted, followed the path of this river.

Both the volcanos were active. The far side of the plain rose gradually to another ridge, albeit a lower one than ours. Beyond it the ground swept further down to rolling countryside and a final breakout to the seacoast and the port city of Corchoon some twenty miles distant.

Approaching this ridge from the east we passed through great meadow-speckled forests. In every meadow, indeed under every tree in the forest were dottles. These were the spares of King Caronne and Breen Hoggle-Fitz—and, I was quite pleased to note, the dottle herds of Ferlach and Gheese. Altogether there was as many as 150,000 dottles. When they greeted our coming it was as a great wind sighing softly through the tall trees. I had never heard, nor ever will again, such a sound. Their presence, however, meant but one thing. Beyond that ridge the armies of Marack, Ferlach, and Gheese, had not yet gone down.

I came alive then; concentrated on an adrenalin surge and got it. There was but one hour til twilight and there was much to be done. We literally raced the last mile to the ridge top. . .

The plain of Dunguring was a three dimensional stereophonic etching of *Best*, *Hel*, and any galactic god's antithesis of Eden. *It was inferno*. As far as the eye could see across that broad plain, there was bloody battle. Almost three hundred thousand men were killing and being killed. Directly below us and to the left at about two thousand yards was a small hill with a rectangular top. Upon it flew the tattered standards of Marack, and I knew the king was there. Far to the left, and perhaps a full quarter of a mile to the front was another, larger, flat and rounded hill. And there was the Dernim Tulip of Breen Hoggle-Fitz, the Black Swan of Chitar, and a half a hundred other banners of Marack and Gheese. To our right, and again somewhat in advance of Marack's center, was still another hill upon which flew the Oak-Tree banners of Draslich, King of Ferlach. The three strong-points were cut off from each other and sore beset by hordes of mailed pikemen and swarms of Omnian-Kelbian knights in full armor.

The field for a full two miles to the front of our northern armies was strewn with the dead of the day's battle. And even now some still fought in that far distance; cut

off, surrounded in their retreat from what had obviously been the area of the North's first stand. We gazed on this in silence. And I held out both my arms as a sign that we should keep it that way, so that all might evaluate the circumstances of the scene that lay before us.

I exacted the ultimate in magnitudes from my contacts. On the line of our North's first stand—made some time this morning—were the piled bodies of twice times ten thousand Omnian Heggles, Lords, and Squires. Above these fallen flew the blazonry of their owners; pennons and banners attached to spears, pikes and lances. One could follow the progress of the fighting by these great heaps of dead. There to the right, and at a distance of two miles was where Per-Rondin, the King's own Commander had gone down with all his troops and guards. And the banners of the great houses of Glagmaron, itself, waved like a forest over the bodies of a thousand of Caronne's picked young knights. . . To the south, like unto Per-Rondin's dead, lay the flower of Ferlach, in that I could see the fallen banner of my erstwhile Lord Gane, of Reen, and of Her-Tils, of the Ghesian city of Saks. Each pile of dead was surrounded by at least an acre of other bodies—banners of Kelb mixed with those of the Omnian cities of Hish, Seligal and Kerch. . . Ten square miles of the fallen; with here and there small groups of mounted knights still charging each other.

And over it all, from the three hills of Marack and the North, came the faint sound of skirling pipes and the rattling of the kettledrums like summer hail. . . Even as we watched a force of some four thousand picked Omnian knights, flanked by two thousand brass-mailed Yorns, flew up the slopes of Caronne's hill; to be met by a similar downward charge of Marackian knights. Om was again forced back, and slaughtered on their flanks by Marack's archers. The same held true for the hills to the south and north. All three were under attack by as many as 50,000 Omnian and allied warriors. From these hordes would come ever and again the attacking force; so that the North's defeat, in the long run, was but a matter of time. I even thought as I watched them that maybe Om but sought to hold them until the morrow, since they somehow seemed to hold back from a final onslaught. As if to underscore this point my eyes lifted to the Omnian headquarters at the joining of the two small rivers. The distance was two miles. But this second glance at full focus revealed what I had passed over before. There, and at their ease, was at least an additional 50,000 fresh Omnian Lords and Knights and men-at-arms. They had been held back for some reason. Then it came to me that that reason was ourselves. They *knew* of our coming. They would therefore await our full strength before committing theirs. In that way

so they no doubt reasoned, they would destroy *all* the forces of the north. I knew too that the Kaleen had so informed them.

Then Rawl grasped my arm to direct my attention to Draslich's redoubt on our right. There were massed foot-soldiers with pike and spear. They ringed Draslich's remaining ten thousand; not only severing him from all contact with Caronne—but advancing too, to cut the 'great road' to the rear of our armies. . .

While we watched, the vanguard of our 30,000 had arrived, and Rawl, with hardly a glance at me for approval, signalled the leading commanders to us. We had, perforce, in the meantime, sent pairs of couriers to the three northern hills to advise them to hold; that help was coming. I had asked that the best trumpeters of our army accompany the vanguard group. And now, as Sir Rawl Fergis, together with the Lords of Holt and Zvoss in south Marack, charged down that slope with a full five thousand of our best lances, I caused those trumpets to blast in unison.

Somehow, and I knew instantly why, the notes of those twenty trumpets were amplified. And zooming in to the raging battles on the three hills, I saw that men had heard, and stood apart, and were looking back to us. And when Rawl's five thousand smashed into and through that Kelbian-Omnian soldiery surrounding Draslich, there arose

such a cheer as to be like thunder rolling across that bloodied plain. The cheers were also amplified. I looked then to Hooli, who had been joined by Jindil, since Rawl had dashed off to battle. They both grinned back at me—and Hooli winked.

"Great Gods!" I said aloud. "And will *that* be your total contribution?"

And then there was no time for further nonsense. We, Sir Griswall, sundry Lords of Marack, Charney et-al, conferred briefly; deciding which route to take to the three besieged hills, and how many men should be sent to each—and how many held as reserve so as to settle the battle in our favor for the night. Lord Ginden of Klimpinge, a burly giant of a man, took the first ten thousand in the wake of Rawl. We followed with the remainder, leaving two hundred dottle wardens to take care of the 60,000 spares who went to join their fellows in the woods. I looked to Hooli, Jindil, Pawbi and the rest to go off with the dottles. But such was not to be. *Pug-Boos were evidently going to war!* Hooli and Jindil clung to Henery's rump, and the other three remained in their places behind Cahrney, Griswall, and Hargis.

As we rode down the slope of the ridge, trumpets blaring, pipes skirling, and kettle-drum's a'thumping, the hosts of Om withdrew slightly from contact with the defenders of the hills. Then they withdrew still

further; after which, couriers having reached them, the whole mass of foot and cavalry—numbering some 150,000 men—moved back across the plain to a distance of half a mile.

Though we felt as rescuers, it gave us little pleasure to come upon those stricken hilltops. We rode over the bodies of the fallen, the slaughtered and the wounded alike. I thought of the night and of dead-alives, and conjured up a fantastic scene of the mass of dead from this great abattoir, all converging upon us in the small hours. I looked at the Pug-Boos and somehow knew this could not happen.

Rawl had left his reinforcements to re-join our command group. He met us at the base of the ridge as we turned left at Caronne's hilltop.

And now Fomalhaut was blazing a hellish red on the western horizon. And this coloration, tinting all the clouds a scarlet hue, together with the belching flame from the two volcanos, lent an atmosphere to that place to exceed the twisted imagery of anyone's dementia. From the King's hilltop the great plain was as easily seen as from the ridge. And it remained what it had been at first sight—*an inferno!*

As we rode along the hillcrest the warriors of Marack who had fought so well that day cheered our coming. And we, to show our appreciation and respect for them, did likewise. Caronne and the sorcerer Fairwyn, together with the remaining Lords of Glagmaron, stood out

to give us greeting. And we dismounted and shook hands and put our arms about each other—and all false pomp and ceremony went by the board.

A great hustle and bustle went on all about us—the aftermath of hacking and hewing. Tents for the King and for his staff and entourage had been produced, and were being mounted even now. Cooking pots, too, had been hauled out. And what with dottle-briquets, jerked gog-meat, and sundry bundles of dried vegetables and spices, a meal would soon be in the offing.

Both Rawl and I strained our eyes to popping for a first view of Murie and Caroween. They were not there, and Rawl looked at me sore afraid. "Nay!" I cautioned him "The Vuun, Great Ap, is trustworthy. He will bring them, and on the morrow. And perhaps, friend, when you think on it, it may be best that he has delayed his coming."

Though dead-alives seemed no longer feared—what with the presence of the sorcerers of Marack, Ferlach, and Gheese, plus the great armies deployed by both sides, it seemed, still, that night fighting was unheard of on Camelot. Indeed, the night was such that an enemy didn't exist. And the space between the two armies was inviolate.

And so we ate and held council, and Draslich came and Chitar, and Hoggle-Fitz, and all the remaining

lords of the three countries. But, as Rawl said, 'One would weep to see the banners of those no longer present'. A full half of the Northern chivalry were slain. And of the 80,000 men of the three countries, but 50,000 remained alive. It was not enough that the enemy had lost twice again this amount, so that a full 60,000 of theirs would never see their homeland—our coming had but made up for the day's losses.

And we told them of Rawl's slaying of Fon-Tweel, and of the ride from Glagmaron; at which Draslich and Chitar shook their heads in commiseration. And I told them of the coming of Great Ap on the morrow, with Murie and Caroween, and that they were not to feather the Vuun's hide with arrows. This last knowledge—that we were not to be attacked by Vuuns on the morrow, but rather, would have one as an ally—cheered them considerably. Still, though our total report was accepted, I noted that sundry lords of the north now looked at me with a certain trepidation.

I did suggest in council that we dare the night for the simple task of collecting arrows; that on the morrow we would have great need of them. I also suggested that whole companies of our archers be kept in a state of mobility, and that at least a thousand of these be mounted on dottles so as to bring their weight to bear upon the most threatened point. We had, actually, ten thousand archers—without armor—easy prey

to men-at-arms and knights. Because of this I further suggested that a number of squadrons of our lancers be set aside solely for our mobile archers protection.

My thinking was looked upon as somewhat strange. But the tactics seemed reasonable to Chitar and Caronne and the others acquiesced.

Before we slept I walked with Rawl to our hill's slope, and saw the unforgettable sight of the wounded who could still walk or crawl; All went toward the rear; to beyond the ridge where they could escape the morrow's charge of frenzied blood-crazed warriors and swinging swords. They thought, I imagined, to die in peace—or maybe, even now, to live.

Dawn on Camelot, when the skies were cloudless, was a beauteous thing. Conversely—and so it was on our day of battle—when clouds were dark and lowering, there was a thing of ominous portent most active in the air. The volcanos flamed to the north and south, joining with the blood-red orb of Fomalhaut to pearl the clouds for a full half of the eastern sky. I had hoped there would be no clouds at all. For until the late afternoon the position of the sun would have been in our favor.

Rawl, Griswall, Charney, our students and myself had chosen to stay with Marack's King as a part of his 'Command Council'. We armed ourselves in that gray-red dawn, drank hot swiss, ate bread, and

moved to our center position under Caronne's standard of the winged castle.

Our front of the three hills extended a full mile. As many as 12,000 mailed spearmen were before each redoubt now; a wall of shields and pikes for almost a full circle around those hills. Our archers were posted higher on the slopes. And between the hills, ranging in squadrons and full companies, were our remaining Lords, Knights, Squires, and mounted men-at-arms. These numbered a full 35,000 and they were kept to the command of the center, under Marck.

Because of the clouds and the lack of sun the plain on that day seemed as a steel-point etching in its total clarity. Despite our losses the army of the North was a glittering array of steel and bright banners for a full half mile to either side of our center martial pomp.

This scene was duplicated across that half-mile of intervening space. Om's Center Command, I noted, had moved up during the night.

If our array was splendid and terrible to see, so, indeed, was theirs. On our left flank Hoggle-Fitz and Chitar were faced with no fewer than 20,000 warriors of Great Ortmund, plus 30,000 of Seligal and Kerch. Draslich, on our right, faced an equal number, inclusive of 10,000 Great Yorns and 20,000 of the flower of Kelb; among these being Prince Keilweir, himself, and his father, Harlach. Their black ban-

ners and black armor, tinted now with red highlights from the southern volcano, gave to their entire line a most sinister quality.

But Om's center—that was a thing to see! They were 100,000 men and yorns; all in squadrons, phalanxes and spear squares. Though our front was but a half mile from theirs, their rear was a full mile beyond that, such was their strength. And in the core of that mass of steel and forest of banners was the Red Hishian Towers, the standard of the Lord, Gol-Bades, conqueror of Seligal and Kerch, Overlord of Hish, *Voice of the Kaleen*. He was ringed round with all the lords of Hish, and a picked, praetorian, band of Omnian warriors. Each was the equal, if not the superior, to any Yorn, and the Lord, Gol-Bades was superior to them.

And also to his back I saw the cowls of five black wizards, and I knew he had not come alone.

To our front and theirs the kettle drums were already going. And, as was Flegisian custom, individual knights were dashing now between the lines to scream challenges and accept those given in return. As many as a dozen duels were already taking place before our eyes.

Before our center a young squire—and he had no right to this since he was not a full knight—had ridden forth from a troop from Glagmaron. He seemed of a tender age and my focussed contacts told me that his

armor was so ill-fitting for him that he would most likely rattle inside it like a pea. He carried a great war lance which he barely managed to raise above his head while screaming insults at that Omnian host in a high, falsetto voice.

This last, I must mention, prompted Sir Rawl to lean to me and say: "If I did not know that my Lady was safe on Vuunback, M'Lord, I would swear that there she was on yonder piebald dottle."

A wave of laughter swept all of us who heard him. But then a great knight of Seligal came out to face our challenger—except that he came out *backwards*, blowing kisses to his cohorts and holding his shield over his shoulder in mock defense. Laughter swept all alike on both sides at this buffoonery. But our young squire then lost his head completely so that he lowered his lance and charged. The knight of Seligal then turned, at a warning from his ranks, advanced his shield, levelled his lance, and held his great dottle absolutely motionless. At the moment of impact, he avoided the wild charge of our neophyte by twisting his great body ever so slightly. Simultaneously with this his own lance tip dealt his adversary's helm a glancing blow so that it turned round on gorget and neck-guard, rendering our young man as blind as a bat. He continued straight on into the ranks of that Omnian armor. They, with great hoots of laughter, withdrew from

him on all sides so that he rode aimlessly in circles. When he thought finally to try to turn his dottle and achieve open ground again, albeit in a most erratic line, those Omnian warriors stopped him, relieved him of his lance, sword, and fal-dirk, turned his helm around properly, then gave his dottle's rump a great thumping whack to return her to our lines.

The duels grew more intense. Coveys of threes and fours were already doing battle in the field. A point had been reached where, usually, the stronger of two opponents moves to the attack. But such was not the case with Om. It seemed that they were waiting for something, and I had a sneaking idea what that 'something' was.

"My Lord," I said suddenly to the king. "May I take these gentle Pug-Boos—if they will come—and ride down the front of our array? It strikes me that some good may come of it, withal."

"An you think it serve a purpose, do so," Caronne answered. "They do not move, Sirrah!. So there seems time for everything."

The King's eyesscanned the sky, as did all those who knew of the Great Vuun's coming. I had time to wonder as I called to Griswall and Charney, whether they expected one Vuun or ten.

I rode with Hooli, Rawl with Pawbi, and Griswall with Jindil. Charney followed next with what

we assumed was the Kelbian Boo, Dakhti, flying Kelb's royal colors from his lance tip. Tober had the Great Ortmundian Pug-Boo, Chuuk. Anyway, we rode down that mile long front and there was a great thunder of cheers from our side, plus 'ohs' and 'ahs' at the very presence of the Boos. There were cheers too from the massed warriors of Kelb and Great Ortmund. These faded quickly beneath the threats of their officers. That was the way I wanted it.

I watched the Omnian warlords closely. Though they knew that Boos were court pets in the north-land, I am sure they had no idea of the affection that was given them, and were therefore startled, even disturbed at the cheering response to our flaunting of these small 'ro-dents'. They were further confounded when we reached King Chitar's hill. For it was there that Breen Hoggle-Fitz of Durst in Great Ortmund rode forth to bounce Chuuk—or was it Dakhti—in his arms. A roar of approbation came from the Ortmundian warriors at this, for 'loud-mouthed' Fitz had been well loved in Ortmund. I noted that these same warriors, undaunted now by their officers, looked back to their center where sat the false King, Feglyn, surrounded by his cohorts. They were curious, puzzled, that the Ortmundian Boo should be in Fitz's arms—and that Fitz, himself, should be in the ranks of Marack. This little show would make them

think. And, I thought, if it had helped to stay one hundred swords in battle, at least we had accomplished that.

And we returned. And still the host of Om remained at ease. The dueling continued.

The sorcerers of Marack, Gheese, and Ferlach got their skinny selves together. They were all—as per agreement with Gheese and Ferlach—on Marack's hill. Their combined efforts finally sent a spate of whirlwinds romping over the massed ranks of the enemy. This prompted Om's dark wizards to counter with a dozen whirlwinds of their own, plus the moving of a large cloud of pumice-ash from one of the two volcanos to a spot directly over our heads where, naturally, it fell. Within seconds Fairwyn, Gaati, and Plati, sprayed them with the ash from the second volcano.

In the midst of all this harmless fol-de-rol, a voice—Hooli's, my own—said loudly in my head: "So what are you waiting for, Buby? Great Ap is on his way. Give him a 'curtain-raiser'. Yonder is the Lord, Gol-Bades. You just may be evenly matched for a change—but isn't that what you're here for?" "Hooli," I replied mentally, "Hooli, you little son-of-a-bitch—some day—*some day!* And then I turned again to King Caronne. "Sire?" I asked softly, "I would beg another boon of you."

Caronne smiled. I think he knew what I wanted and had been waiting for the question. "Hey, Collin,"

he said. "Really! And what could I give you?"

I smiled too. He was wiser, indeed, than I gave him credit for. "I would," I said loudly, so that the others would hear, "exchange blows with a certain Lord of Om. It is in my mind, Sire, that those over there wait for *ten* Vuuns, whereas we wait for *one*. I would not have them idle longer, and I would further disturb their ordered programme.

Caronne smiled again, nodded, and raised a hand. At that I signalled Rawl and Sir Griswall, and up went the colors of *The Collin*. We rode forth to challenge Hish for Marack.

We collected two young trumpeters on the way. At mid-field we halted, pranced our mounts in a complete circle, and ended facing that great mailed horde of Om. The cheers had already started. And I think they had really expected it for there wasn't a scarred warrior of all those northern lands who didn't know what I was there for. When the royal trumpets blasted out—amplified, as it were—the cheers rose to crescendo.

Henery and I were a motionless *frieze* of man, dottle, and rigid banner: no wind could flatten it for it had Pug-Boo starch. Then out rode Rawl and Griswall, their dottles doing a prancing, mincing, formal step, used whenever royal herald sought audience with his opposite, or facsimile.

As their dottles minced and pranced

forward two black-armored Omnian warriors broke ranks and rode furiously toward us, and they spun directly in front of my two ambassadors. "What seek ye?" they screamed, "of our great Lord of Om?"

They were still but fifty yards from my front so that I could see the hoary Griswall clearly when he answered icily: "*His life!*"

"And how would ye get it, ye pewling cuuds of Marack?"

"We will take it with the arm of our champion, *The Collin!*"

"An would ye first take ours?" they shouted, and simultaneously drew their swords. Both had completely circled Rawl and Griswall while they yelled, so that at this last they plunged in from either side each taking a man. The dust from the whirlwinds had settled so that the air was clear again. And clarity was sore needed. For the new whirlwind of steel that then ensued was a thing that the eye could scarce follow. . . . Griswall, wily old gerd that he was, did a bit of shield work that was a marvel to see, and he parried everyone of his adversary's blows. At a crucial point, when his man stood high in the stirrups for another sweeping blow, Griswall thrust out and up, sword penetrating the area of the *fald* between the two tassets of the man's armor. This was the deadly gut-blow, in which the spinal cord is severed below the stomach. The man fell away in instant paralysis, upon which Griswall made the sign of Ormon

and trotted grimly back to my side.

Rawl, in the meantime, had simply beaten his man from the saddle with the edge of his shield; dismounted and ran his sword through the fellow's throat. At which point he too rejoined me where I continued motionless.

Then it was my turn.

I rode forward slowly, with Henry lifting all six pads in measured cadence. I wasn't glowing but I had disrupted my magnetic field again. Though I too loved the Pug-Boos, I couldn't trust them completely. Also, the *thing* of Hish, the Kaleen—if it was watching anything, it was watching me!

I halted one hundred yards from the steel ranks of Om. The silence over that great field was like the aftermath of a thunderclap. I stood high in my stirrups and shook lance and shield mightily above my head. "I CALL THE GREAT LORD GOL-BADES, HIMSELF, TO ANSWER," I shouted. I used my own amplifying system in case the Pug-Boos failed me. My voice was truly stentorian; on the order of a brass gong. Even Gol-Bades, himself—who had no doubt seen everything—was startled. "I SHALL PROVE UPON THY BODY, GOL-BADES," I continued, "THAT YOU BE BASE TO THE WORLD OF FLEGIS: THAT YOU BE FALSE TO THE GODS OF FLEGIS: TO ORMON; WIMBILY; HARRIS: YEA, EVEN UNTO THE ONES OF KERCH AND SELIGAL.

I CALL YOU SENESCHAL OF EVIL: SLAVE OF THE THING IN HISH CALLED THE KALEEN, A THING YOURSELF, WHO WOULD MAKE ALL OTHERS SLAVES. . . COME, GREAT GOL-BADES! I HIGHT THE COLLIN, CALLED FOR THIS MOMENT THE CHAMPION OF THE NORTHLANDS WHO CALLS YOU COWARD AND TRAITOR TO ALL MEN OF FLEGIS. AND, AGAIN! I WILL PROVE THIS ON YOUR BODY!

Under ordinary circumstances Gol-Bades would never have allowed himself to fall victim to such a crude provocation. But in this case he did. Perhaps he thought me just another idiot. Perhaps he felt it necessary to slay me then and there so as to dominate completely that superstitious horde of warriors. Whatever his reasons he did come forth. And it was a sight to see! A path was cleared for him when he started to move. His great dottle cantered along it to the measured beat of a hundred Hishian drums.

No one accompanied him. He halted in all his mighty, black-steel and yellow-bronzed splendour, some twenty paces from me. He then asked bluntly, but softly, in voice that none but I could hear, "Just who are you, Sir Knight?"

"Sir Harl Lenti," I answered calmly. "Called *The Collin* of Marack. Now have at me, Great Lord of Om, and we will settle this bickering."

"Not yet," he said, and his voice had a faint whistling note to it. "I would still know *who* you are?"

"Would you indeed?" I rode forward so that only ten paces separated us, and leaned toward him. "I hight," I said softly, mocking his secrecy, "*your executioner!* Now come great slob, great butcher of men, and end this charade. For I would kill you now!"

The one thing I had gained from this exchange was the sure knowledge that the thing I faced was the Kaleen himself, or his facsimile. For where the heart of Om rode—and here on the plain of Dunguring the Lord Gol-Bades was that heart—there was the Kaleen, and it could not be otherwise.

All was silent then—a terrible silence. Gol-Bades threw his great lance to one side: I did the same. He moved his shield to the fore and drew his great-sword. I did the same. Then he set spurs to dottle and charged. *I did the same!*

I knew with his first great whistling blow that I had, indeed, met my match. Though his movements were sluggish his strength was terrible. He aimed a second blow. I moved to parry and he clove my shield to the vanbrace of my forearm. At which I hewed the very pauldron from his sword-arm shoulder! These two mighty blows elicited a gasp that caused the dust to rise on both sides of that great plain. We circled each other and fell too again. One smashing blow numbed my

sword arm and caved in the right half of my breastplate. The pain was such that I knew some ribs were broken. I crushed his plates in like manner, though it slowed that Lord Gol-Bades not one wit. Then we dodged, parried and slashed, shield against shield, so that the sound alone was like to deafen me. Sweat streamed down my face beneath the heavy helm; the salt of it smarting my eyes so I could scarce see. But I had to see! Whatever could be done I had to do it. There were no Pug-Boos to help me now, no star-ship, no Deneb-3. Gol-Bades seemed never to tire though, as stated, the strength behind his sluggish movements was fantastic; superior to mine.

The answer to all this came when I tried for the same blow dealt by Griswall to his man and missed—Gol-Bades brought his sword from oer his shoulder with such force as to dash the very shield from my arm. But I was still faster than he. And I stood up in my stirrups, whirled my sword around my head and smote his shield with such force that shield and arm flew from his body. A hoarse and breath-drawn cheer came down to me from Marack's heights at this fantastic sight. And, indeed, I thought then that with his arm severed he surely could not last but seconds more. Such, however, was not the case. He came at me again, with great-sword held at vance; prepared to sweep me from my saddle. I ducked beneath

it, came up, whirled, and with one mighty blow struck both helm and head from his body.

And then I knew what I think I had known all along. . . That headless armor turned to fight me still. For there had been no head within that helm, nor arm within the severed rearbrace, cop, and gauntlet.

O'er all the ranks of the northern armies there now arose a groan of terror and of fear. And to exploit it the black wizards of Om caused the skies to darken and the red of the volcanos to give a hellish tint to all their massed and burnished armor. I did not flinch. Indéed, I had no choice. I raised my sword on high, spurred Henery one last time, and struck deliberately with all my strength at the sword-arm of the *thing* of Hish. His parry was such as to dash my sword from my hand. And then, as if to end it, the *thing* struck poor Henery's head from his body.

At that very instant I sprang forward, grabbed that sword arm, pulled all the remaining armor to the trampled greensward with me, and hung on.

The mailed legs kicked, seeking purchase. But I had it now. I arose, still clinging to that sword arm. And I took the entire weight of armor with me. I held the arm with both hands and began to whirl, turning faster and faster, until finally the armor literally flew apart in a burst of steel plates and broken rivets.

I stood alone upon that field and held high the captured sword of Gol-Bades, Lord of Hish. The roaring from both sides was deafening. A COLLIN! A COLLIN! A COLLIN!

"AND SO WILL IT EVER BE FOR ALL WHO FIGHT FOR OM AGAINST TRUE MEN!" I shouted. Amplified, of course.

At that very moment I was caught up beneath the armpits from either side by the strong arms of Griswall and Rawl. And they whirled then in a great cloud of dust to carry me back across that broad expanse of bloodied field. The cheering from our ranks was now hoarse, thunderous, and our Lords of Ferlach, Gheese, and Marack—and Hoggle-Fitz too—were hard put to hold our stalwarts from charging Om head-on, so great was their enthusiasm.

And even as we rode into our lines—and though I was never one to believe in coincidence—there was a sunburst ray of yellow through those dark clouds to the south. And through that golden slot came Great Ap, and Murie, and Caroween. And they flew the banners of Marack and the DERNMIM Tulip.

My head was spinning from both the battle and the pounding congratulations of all on Marack's hill. I still had time to think: 'Great Gods! The *Deus ex machina* has come to Camelot. In the history of planets there will be no thing to equal this.

We arrived on the hill simultaneously, Great Ap and I. And Murie

ran to me and Caroween to Rawl. And, as Great Ap lidded his eyes while we rubbed and clasped, from across the plain twice times two thousand kettle drums began their martial beat. The massed armies of Om, under the five black wizards now, were finally moving. They were answered instantly by our own great drums and trumpets; and by the skirling of five-hundred pipes from every hill.

I threw out a thought to the great Vuun who crouched supine upon our center hillcrest—all had withdrawn to give his leathery carcass purchase. "Great Ap," I said. "You have been true to our bargain. Now tell me, what says the *thing* of Hish at your withdrawal from his cause?"

"He is sore angry, Man. He threatens an end to life for all our creatures. But we do not fear him. For he is yet weak."

"And will you welcome me, an do I come again?"

"Indeed we shall, and come you not with your mating animal."

"Hey! Now, Great Ap," I said. And then, "So go you now with our friendship. For if you do not you soon will be in the midst of the blood which you abhor. And, too, we would save you from the danger of the flights of arrows."

"I will go then, an you will seek me out."

"I promise you."

"We shall see."

And upon that Great Ap sprang

into the now sulphurous air, and with six beats of his mighty wings he was again aloft and away.

"My Lord," Murie said against my chest. "Had you converse with him? You looked as if you were away."

"Yes," I said. And I tightened my arm about her. "And do not forget he was your friend—well almost so. Now help me to doff this armor, for I fear me that I will not be much for battle."

Murie looked closely at me then; saw my condition; grew big-eyed, determined. From her dainty lips orders rang out, and I was soon bereft of steel and padded shirt, so that my right side, which was a wash of blood, could be tended. I demanded that I be seated so as to watch all that would take place. They complied and I was padded about with cushions in the king's own chair. I held the captured great-sword of Om across my knees. The King, himself stood at my back and Rawl and Griswall, and Charney and Tober, and Murie and Caroween (both in small armor now) and all the lords and knights of the King's own council and guard were gathered close too, to direct that battle, and to see to its end. I knew that the spot upon which I sat would be taken only if all this gallant company were dead.

And there advanced against us all the chivalry of the Omnian allies,

plus the Yorns, the 'janissaries' of dark Om. They came as a great iron wave against the three hills. First their mounted knights and men-at-arms—of which they had only as many as we since they had not dotles for the mounting. These charged to meet our lances; but our lances withdrew to either side of the hills, and our archers laid upon them such a rain of arrows as to darken the sky. A full quarter of their saddles were emptied ere ever they reached the protection of their infantry. And then our mounted Warriors charged; coming out in six groupings from the slopes of the three hills to smash the flanks of the three great infantry armies; riding into them with lance and sword to slow their charge, to destroy, and then to retreat, suffering as little damage as possible. There were fantastic feats of heroism upon that field. Whole squadrons of our men would be cut off in the flank charges; cut off, surrounded and slain. And oft times the plumes of the young warriors—of Ferlach, Marack, and Gheese would seem to float, as if upon a sea of armor, only to falter, drop, and disappear from sight.

Then, as per plan, our mounted knights withdrew to our left—since we had noted that theirs had withdrawn to the right. And once this was done the Omnian footmen and Yorns advanced upon our pikemen at the hill's bases. Again they were met with a cloud of arrows. And

again, to our left—where Chitar and Hoggie-Fitz fought—there did advance our thousand mounted archers who poured flight upon flight of arrows at close range into their mass of soldiery.

When the archers withdrew, and before this infantry had time to steady itself, they were hit hard by our twenty-five thousand remaining mounted armor. . . . The effect was devastating. The entire Omnian right flank hesitated, crumbled, and fell back across that bloodied ground.

To our right, in the area of King Draslich's hill, all went not as well. There, other than the King's own squadrons of knights and lords, all was pike, sword, and arrow. And all were surrounded now by full fifty thousand warriors of Kelb and Om. On the hill's slope nearest ours—and still too far for an arrows flight—were the colors of Harlach, King of Kelb, and Keilweir, his son. These advanced against Draslich's final line, cutting their way through the bodies of hundreds of Ferlach's finest. Draslich held. But it seemed that he wouldn't for long. And though each minute saw terrible losses to the attacking Omnian mass; so was it too with Draslich.

It was then that Rawl, Griswall, and the Lord, Krees, of Klimpinge, begged leave to take the King's two thousand knights, held in reserve, to cut a way to Draslich, and thus bring him and all who could be saved from that blood-soaked hill. Permission granted, it took but seconds

for that two thousand to stream to the aid of Draslich, so well-trained were Flegisian warriors.

Again I could see all. Murie stood at my back now, small hands upon my neck and shoulders. Caroween, as she had sworn she would, had ridden off with Rawl. And the banners of the Dernim Tulip—so evident on our left where Hoggle-Fitz fought—was now with Rawl's three scarlet bars on Draslich's hill. I think now that he had had other purpose than just to rescue Draslich; though that, indeed, was feat enough. Whatever. Both the King and Prince of Kelb did die that day; Keilweir at Rawl's hands. And Kelb did thereby gain her freedom. Rawl's two thousand seemed inspired. They never once were stopped, but rather clove their way through the very heart of that weighty mass of metal, hewing and hacking so vigorously that none could stand before them. It was Lord Klees of Klimpinge who smote down Harlach. The fight was bloody but short. When Klees held Harlach's severed head above those slopes, Keilweir, maddened still further by the sight—if such could be possible—became berserk. He laid about him to kill two of his own men before Rawl's sword cut him down in turn; severing his head and sword arm before all that gathered host.

And then they made contact with Draslich's remnants. And all together beat a fighting retreat to our hill, carving their way again

through that mass of warriors. Of Rawl's two thousand he brought back but fifteen hundred. Of Draslich's 15,000, but 4,000 lived to join our redoubt.

The 'conquering' enemy, however were content to stay upon their captured hill, which was their great mistake. Had they rushed their remaining 15,000 to join with Seligal and Kerch before our hill, we may have been over-run. But such was not the case. Like the reluctant Ortmundian warriors on our left—who had contributed largely to the rout of that flank—they, too, were denying Om their strength at this crucial moment.

Below our hill and to its front, there raged a battle between our 20,000 and a full 30,000 warriors of Seligal and Kerch, amidst which, the banners of the great lords, Roume-Fir and Fousten of those allied countries were most prominent in the fighting. But they had not broken our line; indeed, they had hardly forced it.

But now, advancing across the plain was that black soldiery that I had seen yesterday, and today, the pride of Om, and the very flower of Hish. They had as yet to see battle. They were fresh, rested. They were also seasoned warriors who, among all that great host, believed most strongly in their cause. They were 50,000 men, and in their front ranks rode the black wizards. I had time to wonder, and to sug-

gest to Murie, that those cowl could very well be likened to the armor of Gol-Bades.

On our left, the Lord Breen Hoggle Fitz, seeing his advantage had ridden out to parley with the dissident Ortmundians. If he could not talk them into switching, he at least held them from battle. I worried, however, that they would turn, And if they did it would cost Fitz his head. But even as Fitz parleyed, the burly Chitar had shifted his three thousand archers to join our own. Indeed, his twelve-thousand pikemen and spearmen were poised to do exactly the same thing. And, still hovering on our left flank was the entire might of our mounted knights and lords. Great Gods! I thought. Did not Om see this? Was the Kaleen so blind to what could happen? Evidently he was. Either that or contact with alien life was so tenuous, really, that he was incapable of understanding its complexities--inclusive of its tactics in war and peace. Whatever. Unless the Omnian flanks joined suddenly and *now* in the advance of the Hishian soldiery, there was the small chance that we would smash this onslaught; did we too act accordingly. I noted that the distance between Chitar's force and ours was half again less than the distance from Chitar's hill to the warriors with whom Hoggle was rapping. . .

Before ever that Hishian mass joined with the now 20,000 of Seligal and Kerch our mounted archers

rode out to give them a taste of feathers. The effect was to slow them and to remind them that omnipotence in battle must first be won. The Lords of Om threw out a heavy screen of riders to cut down our archers. But a few thousand of our lancers rode these down at full charge. The enemy continued to advance however, slowly; inexorably. In a way Seligal and Kerch did Om no favors. For upon the approach of these fresh thousands, they fell back to either flank and left the center open. The Omnian mass had barely moved into this vacuum when they were met with great flights of arrows from our hill's base-aimed solely at them. None were wasted longer on Seligal or Kerch. Which, when you think about it, was excellent psychology since the warriors of those two nations were instantly aware that a lessening of their own fervor in battle would guarantee that Om would receive the greater punishment.

And then the Hishian warriors charged. And if there had been carnage before, the base of the hill now ran red with blood. Over it all was the constant drums and the mad skirling.

Once battle had been joined with Om's main force, Caronne ordered all archers to shift to the right to take care of the Kelbian-Omnian forces from that direction should they stir off their hill, or to feather the Omnian cavalry, should they

charge.

In the meantime, Chitar, judging that those with whom Hoggle-Fitz parleyed would be delayed by their very distance in attacking him, did he come to the aid of Marack's hill, did exactly that. Chitar smashed into Om's flank with all his strength.

And suddenly, except for Murie who stood next me, bared sword in hand—my shield maiden, I was alone upon that hill. The lords and knights of Caronne's council had gone down to enter battle. And every lackey and cook had went with them. It would never be said that Caronne, among all those kings, stood idle throughout the final battle of Dungere. I followed their proud banners with my eyes. The King's great standard of a winged-castle against a purple field. The Oak-Tree of Draslich. The Blue-Birds of Fell-Holt of Zvoss. The Riven-Shield of Al-Tils, son of Fel-Tils of Saks in Gheese; the pennons of Klimpinge, Flege, Keeng, and of the provinces of Ferlach: all the brave banners.

Did I say I was alone with Murie? Well we were, but not quite. Fairwyn was there, and Plati and Gaazi. There were doing their best to see (from a distance) that no harm came to their kings; though it was doubtful that their spells would prevail in the midst of battle. I suggested to them quite forcefully that their powers could best be used against those black cowls of Hish, whose very presence were an abomination. They joined forces for this purpose and

had some success for one cowl went up in flames.

What can one say, really, of such a melee? Before me at the base of the hill, and stretching as far as the eye could see, was an ocean of swords, axes, spears, and shields; all rising and falling. The screaming of the wounded and the dying was as an incessant ululation, so predominant was the sound. And parallel with it were the shouts and cries of battle and the pipes and the kettle-drums. From far to our right we heard the distant A-La-I 3-La! A-La-La-La! of a small stout-hearted band who had been cut off and were fighting to the death. And Murie turned to me with a shake of her bobbed head to dash the tears from her purple eyes. The sound reminded her of our fight at Goolbie's Keep. And I think her tears were in memory of skinny Angus.

And then a wave of yelling from far off to our left. It came as a shout for Hoggle-Fitz and for Great Ortmund. We were not to learn until later that Fitz had challenged and killed Feglyn before the very eyes of the Ortmundian host, so that they had vowed to follow him in a rescue of Marack. But it was not to be. For in their movement forward, they were in turn attacked by the remnant of Om's right flank who had been with them from the beginning—a full 30,000 warriors of Seligal and Kerch.

Until the end our good Breen

Hoggle-Fitz had all he could do to hold his own.

Twice they drove us back so that it seemed to me that they would over-run our hill. But each time they were driven off. And through the two hours of noon they fought so that one wondered how any man could still lift sword and shield. One thing became obvious though: If we had not lost then Om *had not won*. And Om would not have a second chance.

Two things happened then; both of them expected, I think; but then one is never quite sure before the fact. The clouds, grey-black, grew blacker still. A roaring seemed to fill the very heavens. It decreased to a thrumming such as I had heard twice before: on the south road two weeks ago, and at Goolbie's Keep.

Then the sound grew again. And all that I had heard before was as nothing compared to it. I arose in horror, clutching Murie to me; throwing a null magnetic field instantly around the both of us. "By Ormon!" I shouted to the three sorcerers, "If you would live, know Sirs that the *thing* of Hish, the *thing* of Om has come to us—is with us *now*! If you have no spells or enchantments to counter this, then we are doomed and all our efforts lost."

"What would you have us do?" Fairwyn cried. The three of them were white-faced, terrified. "We have no power against this."

"Tis as you said," Gaati moaned. "We are indeed doomed."

"But you know of this particular magick?" I shouted at them. "I myself, have been its victim twice."

"Aye we know of it; but not at such a level of strength," Fairwyn said.

"Could you have bested that of the Lady Elioseen?"

"Aye!"

"Then the three of you together; you can try."

"Yes," Plati whispered. "We can but try."

"TRY NOW THEN DAMN IT! IT GETS WORSE AND THERE IS NO TIME TO LOSE!"

And while they 'tried' I could tell by their very actions that the first twinges of paralysis was beginning to reach them. I too had not thought the *thing* of Hish to have such power as to match himself with an entire army. If he succeeded—In my mind's eye I could see this ten square miles filled with the slaughtered. A generation of males would disappear from all the north. The wounded and dying who had managed to crawl back to our hill-top now looked to us in terror too.

I watched them closely. So far the paralysis seemed not to have gained, and I looked to our three sorcerers.

They stood all in a row on the hill's crest. Their hands were clasped and they literally shouted their *words* against the first drops of rain from those lowering clouds. And they kept

shouting them, over and over and over again, so that their 'words' became a sound-beat, and the beat a song. And I lifted my eyes to those rain-clouds and that terrible thrumming. And this time, because I faced to the rear, I saw our one-hundred foot ridge in the passing. And there on that ridge, perched lazily on the rumps of five dottles, were Hooli, Pawbi, Jindil, Chuuk, and Dakhti. And even as Murie and I shifted our gaze from the Pug-Boos to our three sorcerers, and back to the Boos, and back to the sorcerers, the roaring and the thrumming died, and the first tiny fingers of paralysis seemed to leave them.

And where the Pug-Boos sat their mounts there appeared to either side of their five dottles, more dottles, and more, and *more* until the entire ridge was covered with them, so that they were boiling over and *coming down the ridge*— And that's when the second thing began:

There are those who fought on the field of Dunguring who say that the North would have won anyway. I am not one of these. But some say this so strongly that I think that with them it is to hide the fact that for all their courage and their slaughtering, and their heroism— and mind you, I'm not playing all this down—it was really 'gentle dottles that won the battle of Dunguring. That's right. It was dottles; dottles who loved Pug-Boos; sweet-smelling fat-bellied, blue-eyed dottles, *who*

would do anything for Pug-Boos!

Murie and I and our wounded, and our three sorcerers who still chanted their 'words' had a first row seat to the strangest 'happening' that Camelot had ever witnessed. Earth has its fabled Pied-Piper; Camelot has its Pug-Boos.

Streaming from over that ridge and from the twenty square miles of forest and meadow beyond, there came 250,000 dottles. They literally *boiled* down upon those armies and *through* them, and *around* them, and *between* them, and *over* them; so that no warrior could swing a sword without he hit a dottle, which most would not do. And there was a wheeing and a whooing (amplified, you can bet—just as our sorcerers 'words' were amplified) that echoed throughout the very heavens, so that every warrior deemed it afterwards a most religious experience. And more than one of them was kissed by a dottle to help substantiate this reasoning.

Of the warriors of Seligal and Kerch and Kelb, most just surrendered. They could see that it was all over and that they had lost. This was doubly understood when certain great Lords of Marack, Gheese, and Ferlach forced their way through that dottle horde waving the 'emptied' black cowls of the remaining four dark wizards of Om from their lance tips. There had been nothing inside and I was right.

The warriors of Om simply grab-

bed dottles and fled in the direction of Corchoon, and the fleet; only to find themselves bottled up by the arrival of our ships, come down from Reen and Saks.

And the *thing* in Hish, I imagine, just sulked; overwhelmed by what I am sure it thought was complete and utter alien nonsense. It had been nonsense, all right, Pug-Boo nonsense; the kind that works like Occam's Razor. . .

And it was all over. And it was that simple. And even while we were all congratulating each other in paroxysms of jubilation mixed with be-whiskered kisses, back-slaps and what have you, rain swept the field. I think, when I look back on it, that the cloud-burst—and it was literally that—that hit Dunguring, was the final Pug-Boo manifestation of what could be done, psychologically, with the proper gimmicks, and at the proper time. They had but used me to set the stage. Anyhow, if there had been any fight left in anyone, those torrents of rain wiped it out. Better yet, while we sat snug in our tents, we most graciously invited our erstwhile enemies, Commanders, Lords, and Belted Knights and Squires, to conference.

I didn't attend. I begged off and stayed abed, my Princess sharing a pillow with me, plus a jug of swiss that, until Rawl's ministrations, had been simple gog-milk. Hooli had come back to us too—to the Princess, that is—and had dared to curl up on

a camp rug beside our bed. I winked at him. He looked stupidly back at me. Then I made some excuse for kicking him out and turned to my own sweet-smelling, warm-tummied, purple-eyed vixen. Beyond the walls of our small tent, and through the thin canvas of the tent next to ours we could hear the laughter of Rawl and Cari. And I thought then, that I really liked him. For he too was *not at council*; but like myself, had 'fled the field to fight another day.'

Later on in the night, I removed Murie's head from my shoulder and reached for my belt. I tried for 'Greenwich' just to see. . . I tried and tried, and tried, and there they were!

"In!" I said. "Well! Well! You're back, and without my permission."

"In!" Kriloy said. "And look who's talking."

"You saw?"

"From the other side of Fomalhaut. We didn't make waves. Buby, so you're safe. By the way, all is forgiven."

"What do you think?"

"What do *you* think?"

"It's all over." I said. "But there's still a big job ahead. That thing in Hish only lost the first skirmish. For the moment, however—and on Camelot that may mean two hundred years—everything is cool. The Vuuns are our friends. The war is over. The North is safe. And everything is as it was—well almost."

"We've got it all on film. There's

nothing quite like it in the Foundation library. So what will you do now? When do you want to return?"

"There are a few loose ends." I grunted cryptically. "A couple of problems."

"Yeah!" Kriloy said. "How's about the 6th hour, after you're back at the castle?"

"No reason not to."

"You'll give us a tape? A good one this time?"

"No reason not to."

"You're repeating yourself."

"Well, yes. I've got this friend with me you see—Friend, hell, I'm going to marry her—with pomp and circumstance. And right now she's waking up."

"Well out then."

"Bless you."

And they were gone and I turned to Murie. . .

For the moment, there was just one tid-bit of knowledge that I wanted out of all this conglomerate of complications. And the next day, as Murie and I and Rawl and Cari, and an escort of fifty young warriors were resting during our dottle-browsing time—we were on our way back to Glagmaron—I tried to get it. I lay back with my head in Murie's lap, and I closed my eyes and shot a thought to that miserable Hooli who sat on a large toadstool grinning and spreading 'goodness'

"Hooli," I said. "You once—or rather you in the plural sense—told

me that you would tell me who and what you are. How's about now?"

He came in on my wavelength. *He actually came in!*

"No big deal." he said with my voice. "What do you want to know?"

"I already asked."

"Well, what are you?"

"I'm an *Adjuster*. I've told you that."

"Well that's what I am."

"What?"

"An *Adjuster*."

"Great Gods!"

"There is a difference."

"Tell me."

"Well, you're Galactic. I'm Universal. *I adjust you!*"

"Great Gods!"

"How about that?"

"All right." I said wearily. "Again. Are you just one entity, or an entity for each Pug-Boo?"

"One for each," Hooli said. "But we come and go. Most of the time we don't occupy the host at all."

"I see." I said.

"Bye." Hooli said.

Later, as we rode back through the thick forest toward far Glagmaron and I tried to contact him again, I just got that idiot smile. But after that, at dinner time, I happened to glance over Murie's delectable shoulder, and there was Hooli. And Hooli winked at me.

THE END

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51

Dear Mr. Landis:

My comments here doubtless will arrive too late for inclusion in the next issue, but the backlog of reading material I have at hand would not allow a speedier reaction to COVEN 13 (3)

I could offer no better support of your magazine, or express my regard better than to remit a three year subscription which you will find enclosed. Of course I was also prompted by the nice, round sum of \$13.00.

What obviously must be said first is that William Stout is an excellent draughtsman-macabreist! And it is a definite asset and pleasure to see original artwork for original stories rather than reprint illustrations (no matter how well done) as in other magazines in this demanding field. I would like to suggest that you might feature some of Stout's pen & ink drawings by themselves in a folio of original artwork in a future issue. While the magazine is supposed to be primarily literature, I am sure such a feature of good artwork would not be out of place.

I enjoyed "LEONA!" over the other selections in issue 3. Though it was a bit contrived I liked Caillou's style. I trust he honestly doesn't believe that the ritual, as performed in the story, would produce any results.

"THE TURN OF THE SCREW" article by Arthur Jean Cox was great. I would like to see much more of this type of material.

If COVEN 13 is a magazine of "WITCHCRAFT-HORROR-THE SUPER-NATURAL" then there is no place for "Let There be Magick!" Such a story is FANTASY, pure and unadulterated.

Gothically yours,

Gordon R. Guy - East Hartford Conn.

Dear Sirs:

Keep up the good work! COVEN 13 is a worthy successor to the old mags such as WEIRD TALES, etc. I don't know where to start in singling out stories for special praise, since I think almost all of them in issues 1. and 2. were superbly original and suspenseful. However I must say this—more by Alan Caillou! He is a superb talent!!!

And, incidently, the poetry corner is really good when it comes to evoking a haunting mood.

Yours sincerely in the good old ghoulish, ghostly, and goblin tradition of Lovecraft & Co. Diana Celenga
Vestal N.Y.

Dear Mr. Landis:

Pardon me for reading between the lines, but what you said in the Editors Cauldron of COVEN 13, for Jan. 1970, certainly hit the bull's eye — maybe that's why the nameless thing pictured above the caption, has one orb vacant eyed. You hint — almost pointedly — "The fact that certain material badly needed by COVEN is exceedingly hard to come by." I guess I know what you mean. . . obviously it's the scarcity of *good* material, for publication, instead of the rubbish seeing print nowadays. Yet, I doubt very much if you have anything to worry about, for the simple reason that after reading some of the letters from readers and taking note of their likes — the taste of the majority is decidedly assinine, if you want my frank opinion — for the present generation of readers appeal, has degenerated considerably, since the golden era of Weird Tales Magazine.

. . . Regarding the stories in your latest, let me acclaim LEONA as VERY GOOD, close to excellent — even the "Fly" in the ointment, and those salacious "fingers" that fondle, seemingly add spice rather than vice, to the shrewdness and skill of character portrayal.

. . . As for THE STRAWHOUSE PAVILLION, all I can say is, that rating of FAIR, has popped up again.

. . . The case of Robert E. Howard is most tragical. Here was an author, who had the genius of literary greatness whithin him, only to be overshadowed by imature emotional reactions that warped his mind, into committing suicide at age 30. He left to posterity, innumerable unfinished as well as finished manuscripts, that are being published today for the first time, some of them doubtlessly having received in their day more than one rejection slip. But now they are akin to gems of literature when compared to what some modern hacksters turn out. Contrastingly, as the music of yesteryear has declined, into an "Unholy cacophony" of bellowing and noise, so likewise, has the style of newborn writers undergone a drastic change, and all not exactly to the liking of more than one old-timer. Although I wouldn't classify The Little People as excellent, still, I for one, think it's GOOD.....

. . . I'm surprised to say that the next three stories were enjoyable reading, WITCH-FISH rating GOOD; LAST RITES being VERY GOOD; and DON'T OPEN TIL XMAS rated about GOOD.

In the future, if you keep at this high level of perfection, you'll have a good reason for being. . . "damned proud of it".

Joseph Kankowski— West Orange, New Jersey.

Dear Mr. Landis:

I compliment you on issue 2. Although not as spectacular as 1., I can safely say that this ish shows definite signs of maintaining its fore-runners quality. It could have been better, but was still very good.

ONCE UPON A WEREWOLF, using as it does a different technique in the treatment of the werewolf, was very interesting. A MESSAGE FOR BROTHER could have been a bit more clear at the beginning, but the middle and the end make up for this amply. DOUBLE HEX was fairly predictable. PIA was totally irreproachable. It was NOT predictable, it had a strong plot and a very powerful ending, and it used real people, the kind we meet in ordinary situations, to make the point: *it could happen!!!*

THE SHADOW TRADER reminds me uncomfortably of REVOLT OF THE SHADOWS, published in Science Fiction Greats, Spring 1969 issue, which, by the way, was an all-Harlan Ellison issue! After two World Science Fiction conventions, during which a group of friends and I spent quite a bit of time (and money—we bid for Harlan's time at a con auction!) with Harlan, I can say that I know him (and his writing) fairly well. I am delighted to see that he is now published in your mag, and hope he will continue to be so. ROCK GOD, however, was not up to par with the majority of his work, the best examples of which (I opinionate) are the aforementioned SFG and LOVE AIN'T NOTHING BUT SEX MISPELLED, his latest (I think) anthology.

I cannot comment on LET THERE BE MAGICK!, Part 2., as I am awaiting Ish 5., so I can sit down with Ishes 1. through 5. and read the whole story at once! A friend who read it, though, says it was very good. Which reminds me. I must close now, and go to put a hex on him. He borrowed COVEN 13 Issue 1. and never returned it!

In the words of the Prophet (J. R. R. Tolkien): "May your shadow(s) never grow less." Reread that comment after reading THE SHADOW TRADER'

Zarathustra guide you!

(Miss) Mary C. Radich—Brooklyn New York: PPS Bell Book Tarot and Ed's Cauldron were most enjoyable!!!

"LET THERE BE MAGIC" "PART IV"

By James R.
Keaveny



Illustrated by

STOUT

-1969



